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A Real-World Story

arly evening Sounds of commotion, running and shouting. Cries of “he went this way, where has he gone?” Chapter 1 Meet the boy The father; Sitting at prayer, hears the commotion and goes out into his compound to see what the noise is about. Looking over his fence he sees an angry mob armed with sticks, searching and calling to each other. Alarmed; because this is a town under harsh occupation, he inquires of one of the searchers as to what is going on. “There’s a dangerous thief about” replies the man, “A stranger who has come into our town to steal and rob. Old man Jones was working in his bakery preparing the dough, and when his attentions were occupied, a thief crept in and was in the process of stealing when Jonesy heard a noise and on going to investigate saw someone and challenged him, but the thief knocked him down and escaped. Search your compound as we mean to make an example of him to other would be thieves.” “All is quiet here” replied the father, “my family and I are home and no-one has come in. Neither my dog or my geese have raised any alarm and we are at prayer. But I will have a look around on your word. At this a cry is heard from the top of the street and the pursuer runs off to join the other searchers. The father casts an eye around his compound, checks his animals and his outbuildings, looks in the woodpile, and goes to his carpentry workshop to see if it is secure. Everything appears in order. The door is still fastened. He decides to look in anyway. Entering he sees nothing unusual. He lights a lamp and with the flickering light looks under the benches etc. Nothing seems amiss. He is about to leave when he hears the smallest sound. Grabbing a stout piece of wood he begins a more thorough search. There is nowhere for a man to hide. On the floor, in a corner, is a bundle of cloths that he uses to protect the surfaces of his work-pieces. Thinking he really should throw one over the cabinet he has nearly finished, he goes to the pile and pulling at a cloth he discovers hiding a young boy, curled up trying to be small. Startled; the boy tries to make a run for the door but the father is too quick and catches him by the arm. The boy twists and struggles but the father holds him firm. He drags the boy towards the house intending to get his eldest daughter to go and call the searchers. Sensing that there is no escape, the young boy seems to deflate. He ceases to struggle. The look of wild eyed terror and defiance fades from his face and is replaced by that look of resignation to the fates, which is so common in the eyes of a hopelessly trapped animal. The fight simply goes out of the boy and

the father sees he is but a child, no more than twelve. He is dirty and bedraggled and has bruising and cuts. For a moment the father feels his resolve soften, then he steels himself and carries the boy into the house intent in holding him there while his eldest daughter goes to call the men. Opening the door with the now limp and exhausted boy in hand, he calls to his wife, who comes into the room to see her husband holding a thin and wretched creature. “What are you doing with that child?” she asks. The father tells her all he has heard, and how he found the boy hiding in his workshop. He tells her to fetch their eldest, that she may go and call the searchers. The wife however, with the compassion of a mother for a child, begs him to be a little patient. Obviously the child is hurt and malnourished and he doesn’t look too dangerous to her. He obviously needs tending. “Best not to give the child to the angry mob for they will surely do him great harm. Haven’t we just in our prayers been reading about the care for the stranger,” she says. Whereon; she grabs a cloth and water and coming to the child wipes his face. Speaking with a soft voice she croons to him that he is safe for the moment. “Look how thin he is. You can smell the hunger and fear on him.” Bringing him to the table she tells him to sit and while the father stands guard at the doorway, the mother takes out bread and olives and some of the meat and vegetables left from their dinner and puts it before the boy. The boy falls ravenously upon the food cramming it into his mouth in great lumps. She sets a vase of water before him and watches him eat greedily. When he has finished eating she takes him by the hand and leads him to the middle of the kitchen. Sitting him down on a chair she starts to clean off the dirt and grime. Underneath his clothing he is covered in bruises, scratches and cuts and is so painfully thin that his ribs show in stark relief. Tears course down the mother’s cheeks while she dresses his wounds and rubs a gentle soothing balm on the worst of his bruises. “Don’t be afraid boy, you’re safe with us. Tell us how you came to this?” Suddenly the boy is sobbing, his shoulders shaking and chest heaving. The boy begins to gasp out his story. Chapter 2 the boys story He is from another town far away. One night his small village was attacked by armed slavers. They killed his father, raped and murdered his mother, bound him and his elder brother together with other captives. Set fire to the village and led them off on a harsh trek towards the slave markets of a foreign place. The journey was hard. They were beaten if they faltered, fed little, and driven to exhaustion. His brother, although older was not as resilient and when exhausted he fell and was unable to get up, the slavers mercilessly bludgeoned him to death and left his body by the wayside. The boy became determined to escape and feigning a dumb compliance looked for an opportunity. It came about on the 10th day of the trek. They had stopped at an oasis for the night. One of the

slavers decided to use him for sport, so had untied him from the rest. In that chance moment, he grabbed the opportunity to flee. As luck would have it, the captor was prevented from giving a vigorous chase by the fact that his trousers were around his ankles. When he grabbed at the boy he fell, thus the boy was able to getaway. He ran as fast as he could and from the camp he could hear the angry shouts and commotions the slavers raced to search for him. Running blindly through the dunes and scrub, he suddenly fell and found himself at the entrance of some animals burrow. Desperately he struggled and squeezed until he was in the burrow and making himself as small as possible he curled up in the furtherest reaches of it. He could hear the slavers calling to each other as they searched for him in the dark. He stayed awake all that night and was too frightened to come out in the morning. He cowered there all that next day and managed to sleep fitfully that night. Hunger forced him out into the morning light of the following day. He was alone. The slaving caravan had moved on. He was lost. He made his way back to the oasis and, having drunk from the water and managing to gather a few fallen dates, he decided to follow the sun. He had travelled for 2 days, when, in the distance, he saw the smoke from a fire. Cautiously he made his way towards it. Keeping hidden. Eventually he found himself at a small hamlet and stealing into it, found a chicken pen in which were a few eggs. Desperately breaking them into his mouth, he was surprised by the owner and subjected to shouting and thrown stones, so once again he ran. Since that time he had found no welcome and several times he had been chased and struck. Sleeping in the open and eating anything he could find. It had now been 3 weeks since he had escaped the slavers and when he came across this village he was starving. Searching for food he had come across the bakers. The smell of the bread had overcome him. Sensing his opportunity, he had entered the bakers and was in the process of gathering some bread into a bag when the baker surprised him and began to beat him. He managed to get out of the baker's grasp and in diving between his legs to escape, had tripped the baker and thus was able to get out of the door while the baker shouted and bellowed for the thief. He had run. Seeing a small hole in a fence he squeezed through to find himself in the workshop. There he had hidden until he was discovered by you. Chapter 3 What to do with him The mother and father listened to his story and looked at the marks on his body. They understood that he was telling the truth. It was not an uncommon story, but they lived in an area controlled by the Romans and as such had a degree of safety afforded by the Pax Romania. The mother quieted the hurt child and he fell into an exhausted slumber. Putting their two daughters to bed the mother and father sat around the table and discussed what to do. He was not one of their tribe. His language, although it was

understandable was a little different, and he was a gentile. They talked long into the night. The man was inclined to take him to the authorities but the wife pleaded another case. What if these circumstances had befallen them and their daughters. What would be the fate that awaited them? How would they want someone to treat their children in similar circumstances. What was the right thing to do? Could they just cast the child out? Eventually, they decided that they would keep the boy there for a day or two, let him rest and strengthen and wait for the town to quiet from the uproar. Then when all was calm, the husband would quietly take the boy to another town and present him to the temple authorities there who would know what to do with him. The wife even suggested that her barren sister and husband might be approached. After all, it was likely that the temple authorities would sell the boy into servitude and not all slave owners are kindly. In any case, for now they would keep him hidden, speak to no one about him and let him regain some strength. The boy slept through the night and most of the next day and awakened in the late afternoon. The daughters were curious about him. The parents had to caution them to speak to no-one about him. When he awoke, they fed him and gave him drink and treated him kindly. That night the man took the boy to the workshop and told the boy that he could stay for a few days. He was safe for the moment, and that it was too dangerous for him to leave the compound. He could sleep in the workshop. The man repaired the hole the boy had crawled through and told him that he would need to be locked in, as the workshop was locked up at night. In the morning he would bring him breakfast. Spreading some cloths on the floor the man made the boy as comfortable as he could, covered him with other cloths and leaving the exhausted boy to sleep, he left the workshop and locked the door. Going back into the house he asked his wife if she was sure that they were doing the right thing. After all he is a stranger. Will I have any tools in the morning? They go to bed. Chapter 4 beginnings Waking the next morning, the father goes to his workshop and opens the door to find the workshop swept, tidied, with the cloths neatly folded. The boy still fearful looks at him. “Well well” said the man “you have been busy.” “I can’t do much” said the boy “but that goodness like yours needs to be appreciated was something my father taught me”. The man set the breakfast he had bought before the boy. “Eat this” he said “then go to the well and wash your face and come back and you can help me with the work. My wife and daughters cannot mix with a gentile so don’t go into the house, but you will be warm and safe here”. The boy did as he was told and upon returning found the man fashioning a piece of wood for the cabinet he was making. The boy came and sat quietly and watched the man as he skilfully set about his trade. Gradually the boy and the man started to talk. The boy

telling him about life before the crisis. His father was a mason and although he had a boy's understanding of masonry he had no knowledge of carpentry. "Watch and learn" said the father, "this is an important trade and can look after a man for all his life." Over the next few days the boy and the father talked and ate together. The boy became less fearful and showed a quick mind and a willingness to help, even some initiative. Every morning, when the father came into the workshop, it would be swept and tidy. Tools left over from the night before were replaced on the shelves and the workshop was ready for the day's activities. The father and mother talked about this. The father of his growing appreciation of the boy and of his willingness to help. Gradually the town quieted. All the searching had not turned up the rapscallion and the people of the village started to forget about him. One night the father and mother sat talking late into the night while the rest of the house was asleep. "It's time to take the boy to the city, to the temple, and give him to the priests. The village is quiet and if we leave early enough no one will see us leave. I can spirit him away safely. The mother looked at him quietly. "Has he been a good help?" she asked. "Yeah! he has been a blessing" said the father "I can feel myself warming towards him and often think that if I had a son this is how we would work together. But, he is a gentile and if he would stay how would I explain him to the townspeople. Not everyone is as gentle as you and the village is not a forgiving place, we would be bringing problems upon ourselves. No it is better if he leaves. I will take him in the morning, it is a 3 day journey to the city so make ready food and provisions and we will leave before first light." "You are right my husband" said the mother, "but it still saddens me that a boy so young should have to be alone especially after all he has been through. He is stronger now, most of his wounds have healed and it is difficult to keep the children from talking so if he stays it may become an issue. I will prepare everything." Chapter 5 the decision The next morning before dawn the man and the boy set off with the donkey on their journey. For a long time they were quiet, lost in their own thoughts and misgivings. They travelled for about 5 hours in silence and passed few others on the way. That night they made camp, the boy fetched firewood and started a fire over which to cook their bread. The father felt a sadness come over him and he thought how much like the son he never had that the boy could be. "Stay by the fire" the father instructed the boy, "We have another long journey tomorrow and the next day. Get some rest, while I go and pray to the God of my fathers." The man moved a short distance away where he could still see the boy and knelt down to pray. "Father; God of Abraham, I have sought your way from my early age and I know the restrictions about keeping separate from the gentiles, but I still feel sad about this. Show me the way you would have me go." When he

returned the boy was sleeping. Tracks of tears showing on his young face. After laying down to sleep the father was restless and uneasy and only gradually fell into a fitful sleep. That night, in a dream, the father saw himself working alongside with the boy, plying his trade and a sense of peace came over him. The next morning the boy was withdrawn, and as they walked along the road the father felt the boy's apprehension for what lay in store. Finally the boy asked the father about the God that he prayed to. As the father started to explain the one true God to the boy, the boy asked questions about how a loving God could allow such things as had happened to him. "Sometimes God needs to allow us to go into the abyss so that we can see that his path is the true direction" said the father. Slowly the father began to think that maybe there might be another way. "What if I was to keep the boy, teach him my trade and our ways. I could pretend that he was the child of a distant relative who is apprenticed to me. No one saw us leave. Old Jonesy's eyesight is poor, he won't recognise the boy. He looks so much better now and it would be a blessing for me to have help and for him to have a family. I wonder if that would work? This idea grew and flourished and that night the father sat with the boy talking. "Boy I am sad to be taking you away, we have restrictions about living with gentiles. How would it be if you were able to learn our customs and ways?" "I could tell the village that you are the child of one of my extended family and that I have bought you to become an apprentice. It will be hard work. You would have to study and work and learn to be a carpenter, but, you would live with us and you will learn a trade that will allow you to make your way in the world. At this, the boy sprang into the father's arms and hugging him close said, "You are the only ones who have shown me love since the world became so cruel. You have given me safety and friendship and now you offer HOPE. I will work hard to make you proud and your God shall be my God. I will not leave or forsake you. I will be a faithful servant." "No" said the father "You must behave like a son. My God does not allow me to treat another as lesser. That is why we have no servants. It will be difficult to keep the facade from the townspeople if we are not united so we must let there be no chink in our story." They sat late into the night, the boy held on the father's lap as the father started to tell him of his God and the history of his people. Eventually the boy fell asleep and the father lay him down by the fire and began to pray. "Lord God of Abraham, forgive me this sin of deception, but it is not in me to throw this boy into the world alone. Bless this decision and make the path clear and I will bring him up in the tenets of our faith and teach him a trade so that he may be able to make his way in the world." That night the father fell into an easy sleep and dreamt of a brighter tomorrow. The next morning, the boy was cheerful and sprightly, eager to know more of this

strange God and of the father's customs. They stayed where they were for 2 days, the boy keen to listen and asking thoughtful questions and an easy camaraderie came between them. On the 3rd day the father said, "You need a name that is of our names, and we need to make you a believable history that you must know by heart because people will question you and our stories must match. Let us say that you are the child of a relative and that your father has died and your mother has begged me to take you in and equip you for life. Her plate is full and she has no one else to turn to." "That should satisfy most people, after all it is not unusual for a man to take an apprentice and it is the duty of a man to care for those of his kin. So you must have a name that is of our people and you must put aside the past and embrace this new future." All the way back for more than two days they practised the story they would tell. When they arrived back at the village they were met by people who asked who the boy was. With growing confidence they related the believable fiction they had concocted and saw that people were accepting of the story. Chapter 6 becoming family Arriving home the father told the boy to go and clean the workshop and to take care of the donkey while he talked with his wife. Going inside he called to her, sat her down and told her that he had bought the boy back and of his plan. The wife listened carefully and when he had finished speaking she said, "Husband, you have been a good provider and a dutiful husband and have given me two lovely daughters but what has really made me grow to love you is the way you care. That last birth nearly killed me, and the doctors say that I can no longer have children so I cannot give you a son. I am sure that this is God's way, my daughters will have a brother, you will have a sturdy helper and the boy will have a life. Surely this is of God. Blessed be his name." And so they became a family unit, the boy was about 12 years old, the eldest daughter about 17 and the baby daughter about 5. Over the next few years the family did well, the boy learnt fast, was eager and willing and a growing affection came between them. The eldest daughter married, and moved away with her new husband. The groom had been proposed by the sister of the wife who lived in a town about 60 miles away where she was married to a priest of the family of Levite's. He had a position serving in the temple's priestly duties. By now the boy was 16 and had matured into a strong and capable lad, able to be of real assistance to the father and so they were able to take on bigger and better contracts. All seemed well. Chapter 7 the crisis One day, while they were working on a house they were building, the scaffold the father was working from collapsed and the father fell to the ground breaking a leg and an arm and being knocked unconscious. The boy raced to his side and gathering the donkey he lay the unconscious man upon it and took him home. Calling to the mother for help, he assisted the now

conscious man inside while the mother instructed the youngest daughter to summon the doctor. Laying him down on the bed they tried to make him comfortable but it was obvious he was in a lot of pain. The doctor arrived and with their help straightened and bound the broken limbs, gave him a sedative to sleep and took the wife aside to say that the damage to the leg was complex. It would heal slowly and he might not walk so well in the future. The arm had been an easy break and should heal well. The concussion was mild and he should be alert by the morrow but he would need complete immobilisation for several months if the bones were to knit. That night the boy and the wife spent all night by the bedside as the man slept often groaning in his sleep. They prayed for his healing. Two days later the man was fully conscious, understood what had happened and what was required. Calling the wife and the boy to his bedside he said, “I cannot work. We have little savings, for I have used our funds to finance this job. Now I cannot finish it and will have to relinquish the contract. Its going to be very hard for us. Four mouths to feed and no savings.” The mother wept. “Father,” said the boy, “you have been good to me and your family kind. I am strong and have learnt much. If I had some guidance maybe I could keep the project going. Perhaps, we as family could keep it all together until you are well. I know nothing of business and would need help for the books that must be kept, but between us we might survive”. At this the mother brightened, “yes” she said “that might work. You can teach me the books and I can also help with lifting and carrying. If we pull together perhaps God will see us through”. The decision made the boy said “Well, I must off to bed, there is much to do tomorrow. I will need to work hard to show that the job is progressing so that the customer is satisfied. Tomorrow I will finish the frame you were working on and you can plan the next course of action.” Over the next months the father healed slowly but with each new day he grew progressively stronger. The arm healed well with almost full mobility but the leg set twisted and the father could now only hobble. The boy worked hard and took manfully to the family’s needs proving a diligence and care and craftsmanship beyond his years. The project came to completion and the father was now able to work in the workshop but his days of working on site were gone. The family settled into a rhythm making things in the workshop and the boy redoubled his efforts and showed that he was becoming a craftsman in his own right. The family became even tighter knit. Chapter 8 the proposal One night, the father had a dream. In this dream, he had been killed working on site and he saw his wife and daughter reduced to abject poverty with all the horrors that that would bring and he awoke in a cold sweat. “Wife” he said “I am afraid for the future, the time will come when the boy will strike out on his own and our youngest is still a child. Who will

take care of you and her. Our family's are far away. You have only your sister who husbands duties will not allow him to come here and our eldest is far away with a young family. Let us have a family conference. I wonder if God has put the answer in our hands." That night as the four of them sat around the table the father asked the boy, "Lad, you've been here with us for 4 years now and in many ways you have become like part of our family. What are your plans for when your ready to strike out on your own, what are you looking for in your future?" The boy was silent for a long time. "Sir" he said, "I have seen the ugly side of life and I have experienced life at its best right here. I would want what you have, a loving and supportive wife and a family, a career of my own and a faithful tradition with a God able to guide me. Is that too much to ask?" "Well said" praised the man, "many chase after riches that do not enrich and reject the teachings of our fathers who have tried to pass down their acquired wisdom. A man is truly rich by the people and supports he has. True treasures are in heaven. You have repaid any kindness we have shown you many fold. My wife and I have seen you mature into a fine man with all the qualities that a real man can provide. You did not abandon us in our hour of need. We are grateful that you came into our life. My wife and I have been talking and we would be honoured if you became part of our family. I have no other son to whom to leave my business when the time comes so we would like to propose the following:- We have not yet arranged a suitable marriage for our youngest. She is 5 years away from marriageable age, but she is a fine child who has the beauty of her mother, she is a quick learner and a dutiful girl. She will make a fine wife and partner. We want for her a man showing your qualities, so we thought to propose this to you. In five years you will be as good in this trade as ever I was, perhaps better. If our daughter was an acceptable candidate for you, we would propose a betrothal between you and her. Then you become part of our family and heir to our estate. My wife and I become mother and father to you and you will enter manhood with all the things a man needs for a complete life." "Don't answer now, for there are conditions that must be met. Our faith and traditions are very important to us. Its teachings have carried us through hard times and allowed us to enjoy the good. You would need to become as we are, converted to the faith and professing it through an understanding of it and identifying with it in the way that all men must do. My wife has a sister who is married to a priest in a distant town. You would need to go to them for three months to be instructed in the tenets of our faith and to undergo the admission of our faith. You will be given a new name and be as we are. You cannot do it here, as everyone thinks you are a relative and do not know your origins. But when you come back and are betrothed everyone will think that all is in order and we will no

longer be lying when we say you are family. Do not give an answer now, think on it very carefully and see if this is a future that you might cherish. Pray on it sincerely for you must understand that our daughter is more precious to us than all else. Can you be the husband she deserves, the son we desire, the man to whom everyone looks to for guidance and succour? Let us go to bed now and not speak of this again until the day after tomorrow when you can share with us the meditations of your heart. Goodnight." Chapter 9 acceptance That night the boy lay awake for a long time. Here was an offer for everything he dreamt of. Was he up to the challenge of being the man they sought? Could he embrace this faith and submit to the admission requirements? He was fond of the child, she was funny and was obviously going to become a real beauty. She was obedient and dutiful and not dull of mind. Five years did not seem to be a long time, after all the four years had passed quickly and this had become his home. The more he thought about it the brighter it seemed. He could see himself with a wife and family of his own and he remembered his childhood and the life he had before the tragedy struck. Yes he thought, God does work in mysterious ways. The next day as they were working the boy asked the father, "How do you know which decisions to make? How do you know which path to take so that others may follow in safety?" The man laughed. "You don't know and you cannot know. All circumstances are different. You must make your best choice at the time and trust that your heart is pure and your desire is for the glory of God. If you are sincere, really sincere, God will make what you do correct. It comes down to the love you have for others. This the building block of all things. Where there are laws they will pass, where there are traditions or culture they too will pass but where there is love it shall always overcome. Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of god. Have faith, God will never fail a true disciple." That night as they sat at table the boy asked the girl. "What do you see as your best future"? "Easy" said the girl, "I want what my mama has, but I also want more. I want to be able to read and write and to be able to do numbers, and the world, I would like to see more of the world. Apart from this village and the Passover journeys I know little of what is out there. I guess I would like some adventure." The next morning at breakfast the boy spoke. "I have thought long and hard about your proposal. It is an answer to my prayers. My only concern is will I be man enough to fulfil the promise it holds?" "Praise be" exclaimed the man, "your answer is an excellent one. For it is in the questioning of his motives that a man makes the right choices. Will you take my daughter as a wife, treat her as you would do a sister, stand by and for her and bring her and her children up in the faith we profess. Be family to us with all its joys and hardships?" "Father, mother, future wife" he said, "let

it be so". At this the mother burst into happy tears, the father hugged the boy to his breast and said "Welcome to our family". Even the girl was happy and smiling. The boy was overwhelmed. The father called for wine and they toasted their new life together. "I will send a letter to my brother in law telling him of your need for instruction and admittance. You must be prepared to be away for 3 months and to study hard so that you may come back to us as one of us and then we can go to the temple and formalise the engagement. Now it is time for work, let us go." Chapter 10 fulfilling the requirements A few weeks later the letter of invite came. "I cannot go with you" said the father. "This leg won't let me. I can accompany you on the donkey to where caravans are going past but you will be on your own again. Do not fall into aloneness for our God will be with thee. Read and pray. Do not tell the Lord how to be. Let him reveal himself to you as is his want. You cannot understand the mind of God any more than the tree can understand the door. Let the door know that in the tree is its being." When departure day came, the mother bought a bag for the boy "I have made you sweet cakes and there is bread and cheese for 4 days. It's a long walk so there is some salvejoyful, help others and blessings will befall you. Study hard, learn fast and most of all. Come back to us. You are son of my choice, I love you." She hugs him close. The little girl now ten demands to be picked up. "Are you really my prince charming" she asks? The boy doesn't know what to say. Till now, he had been thinking about what he wanted, his desires, his dreams. Sure he wanted everybody to be happy and he believed he was benevolent and caring but he still didn't see the deeper them. He wondered about how deep love could be. Kissing the child's forehead he said "I'm going to show you the world. We will laugh and play and run and you will be the mummy and I will be the daddy. But for now you must grow, eat your dinner, listen to your mum and dad, feed the chickens, fetch the water, enjoy the sunshine and the rain, for life stretches long before us. L'chaim." They set off and all goes well. After an uneventful journey, he arrives and is welcomed into home of the aunt and her priest husband. "We've known about you from the first" said the priest. "My wife's sister wrote to us to ask if we might like a boy who needed parenting. God has not blessed us with children and we would have liked it, but as we are of the family of Levi, a priestly caste, we cannot allow it to be adulterated for it is sacred to the lord." "Reports of you are good and my brother in law seeks to be a just man, so I will comply with his wishes. Are you very sure? For from this point on there is no turning back. This is a life commitment. Think before you speak." "If the way this man has shown me is the true path then I will embrace it with all its faults and promises. My life was lost and now it is found." "Good" said the priest. "Drop your trousers, fetch my knife." Three days later the boy is walking

painfully, his fever has subsided and his appetite is returning. “Let us start from the beginning” said the priest. “In the beginning God. On this rests everything. Man is in the image of God, he can do great good and he can do great evil and there are ways that can seem right to him and the end of them is death. Think of war for example. War is counted in destruction and bodies and the innocent always pay for the crimes of the guilty.” War is war and hell is hell and of the two war is worse. Only the guilty go to hell.(Mash) editors note The boy studies hard, becomes familiar with the Torah, the history of the people and the laws of Moses. He attends synagogue, partakes in the Sabbath and other festivals. In due time he is ready to be admitted to the fellowship of the congregation. He undergoes bar mitzvah and is welcomed into the house of David. He returns to the family he has left behind and his arrival is welcomed with much joy. That first Sabbath, the boy takes the lead for the first time and flawlessly recites the prayers. They share a joyous meal with much laughter and merriment. When the meal is concluded the father stands up and says. “You are now one with our faith. It is time for you to become one with our family. We will have a betrothal ceremony next week. I will make the arrangements with the priests. Mother prepare a party.” The ceremony goes well. The boy is recognised as the future spouse of the girl and life falls into an easy pattern of work and traditions. Time goes by and the girl approaches her 12th birthday. It has been agreed that the boy, now a young man, and the girl will wed on her 16th birthday. The boy will be 26 and it is a suitable time to marry. Chapter 11 preparing for marriage One night during the evening meal the subject of the girl’s education comes up. “I have spoken with the temple authorities” says the father, “they have a vacancy for a temple maidservant. The appointment is for 4 years and it is a live in position sharing with the other maidservants under authority of the priests.” “You will be required to do domestic duties as well as temple duties and to study the writings and to learn numbers. It will equip you to be able to share the running of a business and to be a real help to your future husband, more than just a home-maker. When you are finished, you will have the knowledge and understandings to be able to lead women’s prayers and to teach them of our history. Your married life will start with you both equipped with all that is required for a successful life.” A few days later they take her to the temple to begin her novice-ship. The girl is so eager that she runs up the stairs. She is introduced to the chief rabbi and the senior maid servant whose duty it will be to care for and instruct the young novice in her duties and the ways of the temple. They take away her civilian clothes, give her a ritual bath and then bring her the temple habit which she will wear for the next four years. So begins a life of routine, domestic duties, temple duties, study and home-making skills. She fits in easily

and shows an uncommon devotion to the God of her fathers. Chapter 12 the grooming begins Time goes by and the young girl enters puberty and starts to blossom into the young woman she is to become. It is clear she has an uncommon beauty and as her figure starts to round out with the changes womanhood brings she attracts the attention of those who admire her for beauty and desirability. Though still with the innocence of a child and her obedient nature and her blossoming womanhood come new sexual urges. Sensing this, there are those in the temple whose first thought is not of God but of position, power, status. The ambitious who rise through the ranks to positions of authority and command. They begin to look at her with more lecherous eyes, and so begins a slow steady grooming. She is complimented, flattered, given small gifts and allowances and gradually drawn ever closer into the trap that the covetous weave. One young man in particular pays her a special attention and she responds with a growing affection towards him. Careful not to draw attention he continues to ingratiate himself to her. He starts to take her aside for special religious instruction, helps her with her reading, writing and numbers, pays her compliments and praises her devotions. She laps it up. He begins to look for ways to seduce the girl. She is given her own room as a reward for her diligence, but in reality it is a way of separating her from the others and allows for opportunity to visit privately with her. The young man confides in his friend of his growing attraction and desire to possess the girl and wonders how he is to succeed in seduction. His friend counsels him. “Put the idea in her head and she will bring the opportunity”. Chapter 13 the trap is laid One day as she is being instructed in scripture and is reading Isaiah when they come to the verses about the coming messiah. “A virgin shall give birth to a son and he shall be the saving of his people. He shall be called Emmanuel and he shall teach righteousness.” “Would that I was that woman” says the girl, “that my child should be the saving of my people.” Later that night the young priest is thinking on what the girl has said and an idea slowly forms in his mind. What if I was to tell the girl that God in a dream has told me that she is the chosen one, that she has found favour with God. That he is to send his angels to lay with her so that she can conceive and bring the messiah into the world. Talking this over with his friend they decide that this is a simple deception to bring about. She is an obedient girl with a childlike faith which should be easy to manipulate. They could tell her to be careful not to look upon the face of God, but to willingly submit to him. It would be easy to give her a sleeping potion that would dull her reactions and give her abuses a dreamlike quality. She could easily accept the deception and be trusted to keep quiet. Over the next few weeks the two friends begin to put their plan in place. Slowly and subtly they begin to water

the seed of deception that they have planted into the girl. Using carefully selected teaching verses they build up the idea that she might be God's chosen virgin. One night, after she had turned 14 the two young men ask the girl to join them in extra prayers for the people of Israel. They will read and pray, sing psalms and share in the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine. They will beg the lord to hurry and not wait to bring about the glory of Israel. The girl agrees and that night with much solemnity and ceremony and outward piety they action their plan. Giving the girl her prepared cup they watch her drink. An excitement comes over them. The girl goes to bed. The young men return to their room where they have prepared everything for the visitation they have planned. In an hour the potion will have taken effect, everything will seem unreal and dreamy. They will tell her they are messengers of God. Her prayers have found favour with God. She is the chosen one to bring forth the saviour. A few special effects, the costumes, her suggestible state. Her child's desire to be special, her complete faith in the scriptures all will work in their favour. A sign, a sign will be needed. Chapter 14 the trap springs shut The girl is asleep. As it's a hot night she is covered with only a short sleeved shift of a light material, her hair is fanned out across the pillow. Apart from a chest and a small table and chair, the room is empty. Enter the young curates dressed as angels. Seeing the girl they are taken aback. She is even more succulent than they had imagined. Stepping up to her bed they see that she is fast asleep."will you look at that" said the first curate "she is the most choice peach I have ever seen." What does she feel like? He gently strokes her cheek. She is unresponsive, emboldened he begins to caress the girl. Careful not to wake her the other curate also begins to caress her. They are timid at first but gradually the touching becomes more intimate, but still gentle and undemanding. The girls body begins to respond, she stirs to a more exposed position, Her back begins to arch, her hips to to rock. " Now is the time, says the first "She must not wake to find us touching her. We must use this state as part of the sign, she cannot know that she is experiencing arousal from us. Their plan is proceeding as they hoped. In her drugged state, everything will seem dreamlike and unreal. They set up their special effects – the glittering curtains to look like the night sky, the brazier for ethereal light. "Ready?" "Awake" said the first in a commanding voice. "Girl, it is time to wake." The girl wakes groggily. Where is she? What has woken her? All is dark, but she can tell she is in her own bed. The drug makes everything seem strange and unfamiliar. A fire bursts into flame in the far corner of the room about four feet above the floor. Standing in front of it are two robed beings. The light glitters and shimmers off their robes and bounces off of a background reminiscent of the cosmos. She tries but its hard to focus, its all a

bit surreal. “Hail graceful lass, the Lord is with thee. We are two angels who stand by the side of God and we bring you glad tidings. You have found favour with God. He is going to pour out his spirit upon you and you will conceive and bear a son and he shall be for the saving of his people. And you shall call him Yeshua.” “How can this be” said the girl, “I am as yet unmarried”. “God will put his spirit on his chosen and they will come and cover you and direct you and this will be for a sign. You will experience new and wonderful feelings. Submit willingly to Gods chosen, listen to their direction. Enjoy his store of riches, and, at the appointed time you will conceive so the child can be born at the time prepared. This is how you will know they are Gods chosen. They will seek you out when you are alone and confess that they have had a strange dream about you. That this dream had a different quality, more like a visitation, more real than real. They will tell you that In this dream two beings with strange gold complexions and glittering coats told them that you were to be the mother of God. This is how you will know that they are Gods anointed. You must make plans to receive Them. Listen to them and heed their directions “Let it be done to me as my God desires. I am his handmaid to command as he wishes.” “Sleep now” said the angel “the touch of God will come upon you and you will feel a wondrous pleasure”. The effort of being awake is too much for the girl. She sinks back into a deep slumber. Quickly and quietly the two young men remove the glittering curtains they had hung to look like the night sky, the tall brazier, any trace of their being there. They return about an hour later. She was still sleeping peacefully and will likely feel woozy in the morning. Again they begin. Their caresses becoming more and more intimate and when again her body begins the slightest response they coax her hand to her vulva. Gradually she takes over, she makes a small moan and her other hand reaches to cup her breast. “Let us away now” motions the first young man, “she will wake with the crescendo and she needs to be alone.” The girl’s dream is very erotic, though she doesn’t understand the imagery, until with a great crashing of waves her body convulses and she cries out as wave after wave sweeps through her leaving her feeling glorious and spent. Wondering at this new sensation she feels it ebb away leaving her tired, peaceful and replete. She falls into a satisfying slumber. Chapter 15 the seduction The next morning she awakes feeling a little dopey, but well and rested. She’s late! Hurriedly she throws on her habit, rinses her face and races off to the kitchen to assist in preparing the morning meal for the temple as is her duty this month. She gets a little lost in reverie as she ponders the strange night she has had. Her overseer sees she is falling behind and reprimands her sharply. “Come on girl, pay attention to what you’re doing. Stop your daydreaming.” “Yes mother” the girl replies and sets about her work with

renewed concentration. Later the young curates separately send notes to her asking to meet. She agrees and meets the first one who is very shy. “Girl,” he says, “I had a dream last night different from any dream I’ve ever had and it was about you. I feel I must share it but I don’t know what it means.” “What is it” she asks. “I was told that you are to be the mother of God. I was asleep and I woke to find two beings in glittering coats illuminated from behind by a bright light and a glittering sky above and they told me that you were to be the mother of God. It was so weird I had to share it with you.” The girl is shocked. Is this the sign? What happens now? “I must go now for it is time for matins. I will come to you tonight after everyone is asleep. I will tell you more then.” says the young curate Later she meets with the other young curate who has a similar confession. He too said he would visit later that night. All through the afternoon the girl thought on what had happened. She liked the two young curates. What did it mean that they would cover her? Tonight she would share her visitation story. That night they come together. “Boys” said the girl “I am so confused. I don’t know how to think. Last night two angels called Raphael…” “and Gabriel” interjected the first curate. “How did you know that” asked the second? “Well; that’s what he said his name was to me” ;”and to me” echoed the other . “They told me that you were the chosen mother of God.” “Me too” agreed the first. The girl looked at them carefully. “I also had a visitation. Two bright angels said that I had found favour with God. That God would pour out his spirit on men and they would cover me and in due time I would conceive. What could this mean?” “Well” said the first priest, “I cannot speak for God, but if it is his wish that I should cover you, then I am ready. How can it be that I am worthy?” “The angels told me how to know. You have fulfilled that promise, as has your brother curate. Let me kiss you.” What follows is both tender and calculated. The two curates take turns with gentle touches, soft kisses. When one holds her, the other caresses. They make her feel completely surrounded by attention and care. Her responses are eager, innocent – she believes this is divine purpose fulfilled. Their focus is entirely on her pleasure, knowing this will cement her willing participation. The girl, believing she serves a divine purpose, eagerly participates. “The angel said it would be wonderful” said the girl. “I feel so close to both of you.” Over the next few weeks, like children with a new toy they explore each other, touching, tasting, penetrating and being penetrated, the girl finding joy in what she believes is a holy calling and the powerful sensations it brings. But gradually, the two young priests begin to focus more on each other than on her. Their own relationship deepens as their interest in her wanes. A few weeks go by when another young curate discovers what is happening. “I want some” he threatens. “Do you want me to tell the bishop?” The two curates are caught

but their plan allows for this. “Cross our palms with silver” they say “and we will give you the key to her earthly pleasures..” And so the story spreads. They tell the girl that they have another visitation. They have been told that it cannot be that she can know the face of God. He hides in the multitudes, she must accept, No, Embrace those he sends, for his way is mystery. Your gift is to please so that he may shine his light on you. To the girl it was strange – the first two were known and welcomed, after all she is a young woman in the first flush of adolescence with all the force it brings, but it has changed somehow. It’s not the same, it’s somehow darker, less giving, more demanding, not the same as before. Sometimes they don’t even ask your name. The girl gets pregnant. Chapter 16 Escape Now there is a problem! How to deal with this issue? How can they protect themselves from exposure? Maybe they can say that she has gone into isolation. Taken a vow. Cloistered to her room. When the child is born we can dispose of it. Drop it down the sewer. No harm no foul! Nobody can see. It will be easy to show the girl all she has to lose and she will fall in line. What choice does she have! The girl hears of this. Sees that they are not thinking about God but instead of themselves. She sees that she has been used shamelessly. She feels dirty and confused. But the child within her? Is he/she guilty? That cannot be. How can that be the case? Life like love was growing in her being. I don’t know who you are or who you can become but nobody should take that away from you. Let me give you the first breath and such care as I can give. What more do I have to offer? The girl chooses love. I will run away to my aunt. She will hide and shield me. I will have this life growing inside me. They cannot take this child and make it of no value. I don’t know who his father is, but God has promised to be his. I must save him. I will run away to my aunties. She will know what to do.” The girl steals out of the temple, friendless, and after attaching herself to anyone going in her direction she eventually arrives at her aunties house only to find her aunty 6 months pregnant. The aunt had hidden herself away for the first part of her pregnancy and she has only recently emerged. She welcomes the young girl who cries, “I am undone. I have been used and abused and enjoyed it till I found out that I was being deceived. The girl is distraught. She has been deceived, lied to, taken for a fool. Now designated slut, whore, libertine, trollop. Those who have reduced her have risen against her. They are united in their condemnation of her. Standing in judgement against her. She is a shameless hussy, good time girl, libertine, prostitute, foul seductress. But she loves this unborn child. Within her is the desire to be a mother. It is through her but not from her. It is God’s liking for himself. She has lost everything. She is to be an unmarried mother in a society without care. Cast out, shunned. Talked and gossiped about, a shame to her family. She cries at her aunties lap. Should she

do away with the child? Her thoughts are not yet upon the betrothal or her betrothed but rather the cruel twist of fate that took her innocence away and made it a thing perverse. She is crying and inconsolable. Chapter 17 coverup plan Meanwhile, back in her town the temple is abuzz. There is a big chance of scandal, the authorities are implicated in a conspiracy against the girl. What if she was to tell and be believed? They would lose their lifestyle and all its perks. There would be a bloodletting. The temple and its dignity must survive. They don't know where the girl is but she will turn up at some point and they need to be ready. Talking among themselves they decide the best form of defence is attack. Take away her credibility, paint her black. Put the onus of guilt on her. Let them be the wronged ones. Let us create the rumour which will replace the truth. Plans made they summon the boy. "We don't know how to tell you this" they say. "The girl has ran away, possibly with a gypsy or some ruffian. As hard as it is to hear she was a wild child, precocious beyond her years. We've tried to keep it quiet and council her in the hope she would change but she would have none of it. We even had to separate her from the others she was such a bad influence. I don't know how to tell you this, but she seduced some of the young novitiates. Its pitiful to see how their vows have been trampled. I only found out when one of the young brethren came to me for confession that the story came out. She is a foul temptress, a lowly slattern, she seduced the innocent then demanded payment. They were so ashamed of being trapped like that that they stayed quiet until the confessor came. We have looked deeply into the matter. The Mother Superior and I went to see her. But she was unrepentant. Claimed God had given her a gift and she must use it. No decorum at all. When it was obvious that she had no intention of changing her ways we went to her and told her that we would have to tell her parents and you, her betrothed. When we awoke this morning she was gone, her things are also gone along with some of the temple accruments. A thief as well. She was seen last night talking with someone over the fence of the monastery. Perhaps the boy she buys drugs from. I'm sorry you have to hear it like this." The boy is distraught. He has been working so hard towards this envisioned future only to have it all snatched away. He cannot believe it, she was such a lovely, obedient and dutiful child. True, he hadn't spent a lot of time with her, for most of the time he had been with the family he was a gentile. Sleeping and eating in the workshop, mixing with the father away from the women folk. But there were the holidays when they would share meals and recreations. She was funny and quick. Still it had been nearly 4 years and she would have changed. Mostly he was sad for her parents. They had had such high hopes for their future together. Taking the boy aside the chief rabbi said, "Moses was very clear about these things. Some things cannot be

tolerated and must be cut away so that the rest can be saved. We don't know where she is or whose she's with. She has bought shame and disgrace upon the name of your household. We see that she is pregnant and there is no way to know who the father is. Several of my own young men have been caught in her clutches. You are the betrothed and therefore the most aggrieved. She has taken your marriage rite and squandered it on riotous living. We have passed out the word to other temples. She is a fugitive. When she is apprehended it will be your duty as the aggrieved betrothed, the cuckold if you will, to demand the full justice of Moses. This is a cancer that must be cut out." "You are one of us and we have a proud tradition that must be honoured. We cannot let it be besmirched. Come to temple on Sunday and we will have an extraordinary meeting behind closed doors and you can hear the awful truth and hear the confessions of our own lost flock. Then we should ask you to do your duty as one of the guardians of our flock. We shall read Moses and we shall put things right. Pray, read your Torah for its edicts are true. I'm sorry to give you such sad news, we tried our best but the demon inside her was to her liking. Can you tell her parents, her family are well respected and stalwarts of the community. They will understand the requirements. Shalom." Chapter 18 Answers from above The boy turns to home in bewilderment and disbelief. How can the girl have changed so much in four short years. He has been so focused on getting everything prepared for the new life they were going to have that his daydreams had become real. Now they lay shattered on the dirt. He felt like crying but he would have to be strong for her parents, after all they were family to him. How would it change. He was fearful of the judgements he was being asked to pronounce. The law of Moses was clear. He has a duty as part of this community to uphold its values. His is heartbroken, torn and has seen his whole future shatter like so much glass. He stops at an inn to drown his sorrows and to gain such Dutch courage that he can to take this terrible news to her parents. He remembers how her father had waxed about her virtue, her able wit, her sense of destiny, her delicateness and her kind disposition. Things he wanted in a partner. Now he was condemned to lay charges against her as the betrothed and to demand that the law of Moses which bound them all together should be upheld so that the people could be saved. The inn is a raucous place. There were good time girls, prostitutes really. Here the observant weren't so observant. Out of sight of watchful eyes they engaged in a rowdiness and behaviour alien to that seen on the street. Sitting in a corner by himself, trying to get his thoughts together he watched the others around him. Later a girl came up to him and asked if he would like some company. She was a pretty thing, with a bright smile and a sadness behind the eyes which could not stay hidden. He was about to wave her away

when her handler came into the room. She was visibly nervous. “What’s the matter girl” he asked quietly. “You can tell me. I won’t let anything harm you.” Sensing his torment and gentleness the girl says. “My family is poor and my father fell to drink and became violent, my mother couldn’t cope. We have a large family, so it was decided that I should go into service and send money home to the family for my brothers and sisters. This man came and said that he would give me a job, I would be well looked after and would be a boon to my family. The arrangements were made and he paid an allowance to my parents and said I would be able to send more once I was settled. He took me away from home and on the first night forced himself upon me as I was his property. I didn’t like it and tried to resist. When he saw that I was unwilling he vowed to get his money back from such a distasteful purchase, so he bought me here and put me to work. I must help in the kitchens and the waiting and I have to entertain such customers as they see fit. I must go and put myself out there without choice. If I don’t earn enough money I am beaten, but if I do well in his eyes he sometimes sends a little help to my parents. Dad is trying not to drink and mum is doing her best and I know the little that he sends them from my labours is helping. Its a bit better for my brothers and sisters and I don’t want to happen to them as happens to me. Please come upstairs, I will make you happy and it would be nice to be with a gentle man for a change.” The girl’s plight touches the young boy and despite his misgivings he accompanies her upstairs. Once in the room the girl becomes all professional. “Here wash yourself in this bowl, put the money on the counter.” He doesn’t know what to do. Where is that frail girl he met moments ago? He is reluctant while she sits waiting on the bed. “Com’on, hurry up, if we’re quick I might still be able to get another few customers before the night is over.” He looks at her, the soft frailness has gone and is replaced by a harsh bitterness which shows around the lines of her mouth. He smells the rankness of her hair and the whiff of something not too clean. However he is sure that the story she told him downstairs is the truth. Is this what happens to abandoned girls, is this the future life for them? So much sadness and so much hopelessness, so much anger. In a moment of clarity he sees that he cannot place this future on the girl to whom he is betrothed. Her parents would be heartbroken and they have been so good to him. They had such dreams of a brighter tomorrow and now it is his duty to break their hearts. “I’m sorry darling” he says to the girl. “Here is the money, you don’t have to do anything. It is not my job to demand payment in flesh or otherwise. Thank you for sharing your story. Now I know that I don’t wish to be an abuser. I wish you well. I’m sorry for your plight. If you ever find the courage to walk away know that I will help. I can be found at the carpentry shop”. “Don’t you like me” pouted the girl. “Yes I do, that’s

precisely why I cannot buy or sell you" replied the boy. "You have been a great help. I have a conundrum that I must deal with and you have shone a light. Thank you again. I will pay for the whole night and leave by the back stairs and you can have a good sleep knowing that you have your night's money and don't need to be anybody's plaything for this night. Kissing her tenderly he left by the back stairs. The girl can't believe what has just happened. He took nothing, treated her with respect, made sure that she would not be beaten for non achievement. So much different from the fat, smelly and boorish men that were the norm. It was a relief not to have to lay under a sweat soaked loser hating herself as she said unfelt mouthings and feigned an enjoyment, when all she truly felt was degraded. "Well girl, she says to herself looks like you got the night off. Best make the most of it they don't come by very often." She rose washed her face and hands in the bowl. Locking the door with a do not disturb sign she settled into a relaxing refreshing and undisturbed sleep. Such luxury! was her last thought as she turned out the candle. Chapter 19 Compassion The boy wandered back to the workshop a little unsteadily. He wasn't used to strong drink. He thought of the woman he had left behind, of the strange juxtaposition of frailty and hard heartedness. He didn't want that for the girl regardless of what she had done. He doesn't really owe any loyalty to the faith. It is not the faith that has been good and kind to him. It is the girl's mother and father. They love the girl and they have enough heartache in store. He hates to be the bearer of bad news, but he couldn't let the priests tell the story to the parents. Even as he was speaking with them and they were loudly professing sorrow and compassion, he had felt that it was insincere. They were looking over their own shoulders. They had been her guardians, the trust was with them, and now they wanted to bury their mistakes. Hide it away as though it never happened. Poor girl. All those years in this institution when you could have been at home helping your mother. Instead we opted to remove her from home to prepare for a future that was beyond her comprehension. He remembers how afraid and lonely and hungry he was. Her family have been great to him. He will bring the bad tidings and then together they will decide the course of action. The father is observant but not churchgoing, preferring to say his prayers quietly by himself. He doesn't wear the vestment robes, he avoids the high days and holy day but even so observes a dedication. The boy feels that there is more truth in his way. Arriving back at the workshop he calls the father and mother. "You will be wanting to know why I was summoned to the temple. I'm afraid that its all very sad news. It appears that your daughter has absconded and they don't know where she is. They have passed word to other temples and all are on the lookout for her but they are claiming that she has become a good time girl

and has run off with a bandit crowd. She has been gone two days. They had much to tell me of her miscreants, they accuse her of giving way to a lecherous demon and becoming a Jezebel and of leading the young novitiates astray with her wild and unfettered ways. They described a girl I don't remember or imagine. True, it has been four years and life changes a lot at that age. I feel so sad for you. I know how fond you are of her and how much you wished good things and you have been good to me and given me a life when all seemed lost. I cannot do that for you, but this I can do. As the betrothed I have the right of decision. The priests have pushed for condemnation as an adulteress and I understand under the tradition that is true and she is an adulteress and as betrothed I have the right to demand my honour is upheld and the law requires it. But you have been good to me. Now the only family I remember, and the girl, I remember her as a bright 10 year old, I want the best for you and her. I am told she is with child and it is impossible to know who the father is as there are so many choices. Well This choice belongs to me. I can withstand the demands of the temple. After all I'm really a gentile." "Can you allow the girl to come home and live the sheltered life here with you so that she be not abused. I last night met a girl who fell into a similar situation and I do not want your daughter to inherit her estate. And a grandchild is a wonderful compensation." "Would you" exclaimed the father. "My daughter may have done wrong and be a shame to me but she is still our daughter and we love her and will believe in her. Maybe it was that accursed place where we sent her to equip her for life that has been the cause of this. We should have kept her safe at home but we both so wanted you to have all the goodness that life brings. Now it is gone. We will understand once this matter is settled if you have to go away. You are now a better carpenter than me and can put your skills to good use anywhere. You will always be in demand. But I also know that you were looking towards the future we had tried to map out and understand that it would be difficult to live in this compound with all its broken dreams and someone's bastard to remind you everyday of lost hopes. You have seen enough tragedy in you life. Please do this for us. Refuse to condemn our daughter so that she may live. We will bring her home when she is found and she can live out her days as a prisoner of our compound away from the gossip and looks. We can spare her that, but there will be many who will take delight in her undoing so it grieves us to know that she will not have the fullness that my wife and I have experienced." "But the grandchild will be in our midst and perhaps God will grant that this shame only last for one generation and then the future can be bright again. We will sorely miss you, we have come to love you but we understand some pains you don't need to be reminded of." Chapter 20 rejecting evil That

Sabbath he is called to the temple, there is to be a meeting and matters discussed. He attends alone. They waste no time laying down a liturgy of faults and a tale of wilful disobedience. They castigate the girl as a strumpet, wanton, headstrong and disobedient. They call for the full measure of the law. The people must be protected and shielded from such promiscuous behaviour, such wanton abandon, the wholesale embrace of the pleasures of the flesh and the delight in carnality is a bad example which will lead many others astray. She must be dealt with as prescribed by law and tradition. The vote is unanimous. She is to be stoned to death as the only right punishment. What does he say? the cuckolded fiancée? He is the most disgraced and as betrothed it is his right to make the decision. This builds at him ever more pressure to conform to the group directive. The boy feels overwhelmed. He is not used to people demanding that he be the decision maker. It's easy enough on a building site when you are dealing with rocks and timber but this is someone's life. Do you have to carry the burdens of sin heavily for all your life? He remembers being young and vulnerable and desperate. He remembers the night with the whole village looking for him and his heart on his sleeve afraid of another bashing which could end his life. Of the hunger, Loss and complete bewilderment he experienced. Then being discovered by the father and finding no escape how he became resigned to being dreadfully hurt maybe killed and then a miracle! The man's wife didn't see a thief, she didn't see a foul attacker, she didn't see a criminal. She saw a small frightened and abused boy and demanded that he be shown love and not judgement. He remembers how she fed him and washed his face and dressed his wounds always singing softly in a gentle melodious voice and how it was her that turned her husband and all the good that had come into his life because of her. He could do as much as them in the very least. It was now his time to address the congregation. They were expecting a simple nod to their plans. Hadn't the whole meeting dwelt on the prescribed punishments. Were there not enough witnesses to the girls wanton behaviour? Here she was, a runaway unable to be bought before the judgement but they could sentence her in absentia and then any congregation anywhere could apprehend her and deal the full measure of the law indiscriminately and with a finality that ensured the continuance of the tradition they held so dear. "Brothers and sisters, I am aware of the accusations and the prescribed punishment and I believe that the law of Moses is a good thing given by God. But I have a quandary. When I was young and my people couldn't keep me they apprenticed me to the girls father and his family became my family. I had never known such kindness and I know that the girl is the apple of their eye. How proud I was when they proposed our marriage. In only a few short years I would have everything a

man can aspire to. A trade able to support us, a beautiful wife able to give me many children and with the ability to be beside me running the show together. A real team born of consensus and shared goals. I am not ashamed to tell you that I looked forward to the wedding night and the inheritance that would become mine and I have worked long and hard to get everything ready. Now on the eve of realising this dream I find that it is all mist and my worst fears are realised. I was angry and wanted satisfaction and repayment for the hurt I was feeling, and the council I received showed a clear path that I should take and I was prepared to want the full punishment of the law." "But then God intervened, and he showed me someone who had strayed and the depths that had taken her to, and I remember a bright 6 year old full of life and happiness, adventure and an abdominal spirit. And I remember my life before someone took pity on my lowly estate. My life could have been all so different but I am before you today as the beneficiary of a greater good, a compassion for my circumstances and a belief that I could be made for better things. This saved my life, and although things are not going to happen as I intended I still was saved. So this is my decision and it is irrevocable for as the wounded party it is my right to insist on my honour being upheld and my wishes being carried out. I revoke the law of Moses! Allow her to live out her days in her father's compound, out of sight and condemnation. Let her remain as a widow in her father's home. Let no harm come to her or any child she may bear. Her parents are my parents and if it is their wish that she be spared then it is also mine. This is my final word! Once she is found she is to be returned home without judgement and she will remain with her parents to care for them in their old age. I shall go forth to seek my way in the world. You are bound to respect my wishes for as the damaged party I have the right to make demands. Let no harm come to the girl. Let your agents know that. She is to returned to her father's house. I have spoken and it is final." It took a lot of courage to stand before the whole congregation and speak against the mood of the whole meeting. But his mind was made up. He would stay until she was found and returned home then he would take his swag and march out into the world. Alone again after all. Well it had been good while it lasted. Much murmurings at the meeting, but his position is unassailable and his wishes must be respected. However, the guilty parties were very unhappy with the decision. It would be so convenient if the whole affair could be swept under the carpet, buried as it were with the foul seductress of whom only gossip and innuendo would remain. Now she would reside in her father's house, silent witness to their machinations, impotent perhaps but still present. Not ideal but there was no choice. Chapter 21 the aunties story Meanwhile, back at the aunties house the girl is destroyed. It is a blessing that her uncle is away at his

duties. The two women, niece and auntie have time to talk. The girl tells her shameful story. She admits to having enjoyed most of her encounters and she was proud to have been selected by God. Now she sees that she was deceived by those who only thought of themselves. She had thought that they had cared for her, in fact she had deceived herself. What was to become of her? Patiently listening the aunt decides to share with the girl her own story. Maybe it will help the girl to accept her situation, to understand that God can bring good out of even the most awful situation. “Girl” said the auntie “I have a story to share with you. As you can see I am now going to be a mother and God has taken away my barrenness. But it hasn’t come about in a fairy-tale way. I too, went through great abuse and distress and at my darkest hour God offered me a lifeline and through this lifeline I am able to find beauty out of ashes.” “Let me start at the beginning. Your uncle was away from home about his duties, when one morning I woke before the dawn. I wanted to go to the river while everybody was still sleeping and take a ritual bath. So I went to the part of the river where the current is strong and people would not bathe for fear of being swept away, but I knew of a small pool sheltered from the current where I could bathe freely. While I was bathing two soldiers came upon me. They were drunk and up to no good. One of them grabbed me by the hair and dragged me from the pool naked. “She is no lass” growled the second “but she has a tidy figure and I am feeling for some sport.” “With this he slapped me so hard I fell to the ground dazed. I felt one of them grab me and hold my arms above my head leaving me exposed and the other grabbed my legs and forced himself upon me. I screamed and begged but they took no notice. They took turns with me and they were violent. I drifted in and out of consciousness and the nightmare seemed to go on forever. I heard them speaking among themselves. They planned to cast me into the raging torrent when they had exhausted their abuses and I would be drowned and there would be no witness to their actions. I was without strength and I was hurting and I resigned myself to the fates. They decided I should pleasure them with my mouth and although they beat me and threatened me I would not loose my jaw. This enraged them so they decided they would sodomise me. When the first entered me with such roughness I cried out in pain. Suddenly, the soldier holding me while the other abused me let go of me, and I saw him fall into the torrent and a man then grabbed the one who was sodomising me and threw him also into the torrent and he also was swept away.” Then in the midst of this nightmare, I felt a gentle hand upon me saying “its OK now, its all over. Here let me help you into your garments and I will assist you home where you can be safe.” With this he laid garments on me to shield my nakedness and half carrying me bought me home. When he saw I was alone he fetched and

heated water, took some herbs from his bag and made a balm and cleaned and dressed my wounds, he gave me a sleeping potion and told me I was to rest. He would be there when I awoke so I would not be alone and I was safe. When I woke I was in my own bed, sore and bruised and the horrors of the previous day returned. Then again I felt a gentle touch, it was my saviour. “Be calm” he said, “it is over. What is done is done and cannot be undone. You will have to make peace with it, but for now, eat this broth I have made, let me dress your wounds again and take this sleeping potion and when you awake next time you will feel much stronger.” For three days this was the pattern. When I awoke on the fourth day I was feeling much stronger, my bruising’s had subsided and some of my strength had returned. It hurt to get out of bed and to walk. I saw that the house was tidy and that there was food on the table. I was wondering what had happened when my rescuer opened the door. “Don’t be afraid” he said, “you are safe at home and I will take care of you until you are recovered or until there is someone who can take over your care. Have you no family?” I told him that I have a husband who is about his duties and would not be back until the day of the new moon some 3 weeks away. “Then I will stay” said the man who introduced himself as John. He explained that he was on a pilgrimage, and had risen very early, when he heard my cries and stealing up quietly he had come across my plight. Keeping himself hidden he crept up close and seeing that the soldiers were occupied with their actions he saw the opportunity to push one into the torrent and if he was fast enough he would be able to grab the other and deal a similar treatment. This he did, and in doing so saved my life for it was sure that the soldiers wished no witness. He covered my nakedness, bought me home and tended me. It was so strange, the juxtaposition between so much abuse and so much care. After a week I was able to leave the bed and begin to do things about the house. John continued to stay and to help with the chores and to treat my wounds and to talk to me gently. He restored a faith in me with his gentleness and caring, asking nothing for himself, it was like a guardian angel. He spoke of hope and of the courage to continue. We talked and he read to me from the scriptures and eased my fears. Chapter 22 the aunts dilemma Now a new and more horrifying thought entered my mind. I have only ever been with my husband. Now I had been with two other men. What if I was pregnant? Would there be a child growing within me to remind me daily of this terrible experience. How could I love such a child even when a child is my dearest wish? It might not be too hard to keep what has happened from my husband, but how would I deal with it, to look everyday at the child and see the events. It is too horrible. How could I live with this? Gradually an idea began to form. What would it be if I could see the child and instead of seeing the horrors I

could instead believe that the child came out of rescue and tenderness. What if I could believe that the child was born out of the care and love that John was showing me. What if I could believe that the child was John's. It cannot be my husband's, and it would be better if he never knew of the events. This idea took hold and I came to see it as a way to the future. I was feeling better and my wounds were mostly healed and I could see that John was getting ready to resume his pilgrimage. My husband would be home in a week and he would never need to know. If I was to seduce John I could imagine that the child if there is one was his and I could continue my wifely duties towards my husband and he would never know or have to deal with the pain. That last night while John was sleeping, ready for his departure in the morning I rose from my bed, removed my garments and lay down with John. He awoke to find me caressing and kissing him and when he went to stay my hand for I was another man's wife I said to him. "I am near the turn of life and have had no children but I also have never been with another man so it may be my husband who is barren and not me. If I am with child I cannot live with the thought that a child could have been born out of my abuse. I need to be able to believe that it is conceived through love and care. Please please allow me this fiction that I may live and not die." John looked at me for the longest time and then said. "I have not sought to take advantage of you and wish no harm upon your life or marriage, but I do understand what you say." With this he reached out brushed my face with his hand and bent to kiss me. It felt strange to kiss another man but he was tender, patient and skilful. He made love to me in a way that allowed me to respond at my own pace and I lost all fear and it was a wondrous coupling. I fell asleep in his arms and when I awoke he was gone. I don't even know his last name! When my husband returned home hungry for me, I was able to accept him when I had been so afraid that I would not be able to for the memories it might bring back. Weeks later it became obvious I was with child and my husband was delighted. I do not know who is the father of this growing child but I can believe it is John's or even my husband's, and I know I can now love this child as a gift from God. Perhaps it is possible for you to know that your child will also be a gift from God and the fulfilment of womanhood. Over the next days the two women talked and gradually the girl came to accept the new life growing within her and came to rejoice at this new love seeded within her. Chapter 23 the uncles dilemma When the uncle returned home from his duties he was morose, sullen and uncommunicative. Before this tour of duty, a local gossip had told him that there had been a man staying in his house while he was away on his previous assignment. He returned home full of rage at this deception and had demanded to know. Had there been a man? The wife broke down and

sobbing she retold all the events. She held nothing back and begged her husband to understand. Hadn't she been through enough. Wasn't he glad that she had been saved, nursed and cared for. If it hadn't been for John she would have been killed. If it hadn't been for John she wouldn't have had the courage to live. As it was, they still had a life before them. He was horrified at his wife's testimony but he believed her and tried to put away the thoughts of her infidelity and of seeing her as damaged goods. He tried to be understanding and caring, but his mind would not let go of the idea and he wrestled with it constantly. He was in a dark place and he begged God to give him the grace that his wife so sorely needed. But the torment persisted. Seeing the girl, and her state, the uncle wondered at the fickleness of women. Hadn't he trained and taught her betrothed? Hadn't he seen that the betrothed was a good and sincere man and hadn't he grown fond of him in the time they were together? Wasn't it all for this girl? And yet here she was unmarried and pregnant, not knowing who was the father of her child. Why were women so shameless? He didn't want her child there to taunt his own situation. He immediately drafted a letter to the girl's father asking if he would come and collect her. One bastard in the household would be enough. Afraid of his dark thoughts he decided not to speak for fear of what he might say. And he refused to speak with either of them. Later the letter to the girls parents arrived telling them of her whereabouts and condition and requesting that someone should come and collect her. The parents feeling were mixed, overjoyed that she was alive and safe, distraught that she was undone, sad that the very promising future they had planned out was in tatters. Now they needed to collect her but how could they arrange it. The father wasn't able to travel and the journey was too much for the wife. Who could they send? Finally they decided that they must ask the boy if he would go and bring her. It would be difficult for him but they had no one else. Calling him to their table they sat him down and showed him the letter. They knew it was a lot to ask but they had no one else. The boy agreed, he would finish the job he was on then he would set out to retrieve the girl. It would be several days before he would be able to leave and the journey would take two weeks there and perhaps longer back, but all being well within two months she would be home. He would need to take their donkey as she wouldn't be able to make such a hard journey in her condition. The boy sets off. Chapter 24 Caring for the aunt When he arrived at the house to fetch the girl it was nearing the time for the aunt to give birth. She had been unwell these last weeks and needed to rest. This late pregnancy was taking a toll on her health and stamina. Her husband was again away with his duties and even when he had been home he constantly busied himself with church matters. He didn't like to be in the house with the two pregnant

women. He told the girl that he had come to collect her and return her to her father's house but the girl resisted. She said to him, "I know I have been a great disappointment to you and the life we had mapped out is gone and I am to live my life out in shame in my father's compound and I thank you for not requiring the full punishment of the law. I did not mean to hurt you, I was foolish and deceived and thought pride at great things promised when in truth I was undone. But I cannot leave my auntie now. She is near her time and there is no one to look after and care for her. Please stay with us until she is delivered so that I might care for her. She needs me as I have needed her." The boy agrees, after all, the aunty was kind to him when he was here studying and he can see that this is a late pregnancy and that she cannot cope alone. He sees that the two women are good to each other and that the girl is tirelessly shouldering the burden of care for the woman and of the chores and home-making, the cooking, the cleaning all of the household duties. He often sits with the aunt to keep her company while the girl tends to the household and they talk. He asks the aunt why the uncle is so changed, not happy and joking as he was when he had stayed with them before. The aunt is quiet for a long time. "I will tell you" she finally says, "it may be that it will help you understand the girl. She's a good girl. Would have made a fine wife, but she too has a difficult story to face." She then relates all of the events which have happened to herself, leaving nothing out. "So you can see why my husband is having a hard time. I have lived with him for 35 years and I know he is a good man and he will come to terms with events and he will be a good father, but for now only our prayers can help him find the courage to overcome. It is hard but you being here is a help." The boy is shocked. He remembers the abuses he suffered and how kindness overcame. He also speaks with the girl. She too is candid about how she came to be in this position. He sees that she has been deceived by those who knew how to manipulate her childish dreams. He begins to think about the child growing within the girl. It will need a father and the girl's father has shown him that it is possible to love someone else's child as if it was your own. More than that he sees the dignity with which the two women give each other and his heart softens for the girl. A closeness begins to build between them. Chapter 25 grace and reconciliation The uncle is in church praying. Begging God to allow him to put past the terrible thoughts he has. One night while praying he has this thought. "What if I could see the coming child not as someone else's bastard, what if I could see him as a gift from John, just as John saved my wife's life and tended her and returned her to me, able to deal with the things that happened in my absence. What if there would have been no John. I would have a murdered wife and no future, but now I will have my wife back and a child for comfort in our old age. If my

wife can put this past behind her and embrace the future could I do that also?" This thought begins to take hold and pushes the darker thoughts aside. One day the boy rushes into the temple. "Quickly it is time, you must come home now for the labour is started." Gathering his bag the uncle follows the boy back to the house to find that his wife has already given birth to a baby boy. There are others there, asking for a name for the child. The aunt tells them that the child is to be called John. They question her; Why John? There are no members of your family called John, choose another name. The aunt insists that the child be called John, when at that moment the husband and the boy arrive. The crowd ask him for a name for the child, a proper family name. The husband looks at them and then taking a piece of paper he writes on it. HIS NAME IS JOHN. Turning towards his wife cradling the child, he in a moment of light sees that he has gained rather than lost. His wife loves him, her greatest loss has been recovered and this child will only know him as father. A feeling of immense joy overtakes him and he loudly blesses God for his goodness and mercy. Taking the babe in his arms he kisses his wife and tells her how sorry he is for his thoughts. All is good! Falling to his knees , raising his hands towards heaven he intones: Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, who has come to his people and set them free He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, born of the house of his servant David. Through his holy prophets God promised of old to save us from our enemies, from the hands of all that hate us, To show mercy to our ancestors, and to remember his holy covenant. This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham: to set us free from the hands of our enemies, Free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life. And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, To give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of all their sins. In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace. Chapter 26 returning home The boy and the girl stay on and at the 8th day they attend the baby's circumcision event. As is customary, they remain with the new mother for the full month after birth and then get ready to begin the return journey. It will take them 3 weeks and the girl is now in her third trimester and although she is young and healthy she tires easily and is often uncomfortable. A message arrives from the parents of the girl. The temple authorities in the town have wind of her return and there is gossip everywhere. People love to talk and to judge by appearances. They enjoy being horrified by scandal. If you can come in unnoticed it would be better. You will be safe at home but it may feel ugly on the streets. There will be those who whisper and stare, make crude jokes, even

shout and spit. The boy and the girl steal into the home compound in the early hours of morning and are quickly taken inside. “Thank goodness you are safe” said the mother “we have been so worried. This is such a messed up business, there is so much to be dealt with, at least we are all together in one place. Daughter are you in good health, does the baby cause you much hardship? ” No mother “said the girl, “Aunty has taken very good care of me and helped me in ways that are fantastic, and she is now the mother of a baby boy called John. Uncle is so proud! Claims he’s going to be the best father a child ever knew. You should see him praising God for this blessing. He seems truly happy.” “Well that’s a welcome change of perspective. At least there is some good news, praise be! Well let’s just enjoy this moment. You two must be dusty from your journey, go wash up while I prepare breakfast for us all, then you can go sleep, I’m sure you’re very tired.” Washed and changed and feeling much better the boy and the girl join her parents, for it is no longer their parents. At the table is bread and olives cheese eggs water and wine. “Before we eat” said the father “let us join hands and pray. I have wanted you all here under the one roof for what seems the longest time. I wish to give thanks with you.” “Father your ways are not our ways and your thoughts are not our thoughts, just as the heavens are above the earth so are your ways above ours. We trust that you will bring beauty out of ashes as you have done for us before. Out of certain defeat we rose victorious by the practical application of your word and the guidance you give. Please we beg you, shine the light of your wisdom so that we can safely navigate the rushing waters. Blessed be your name.” They eat, a surprisingly quiet meal. The many adjustments they need to face weighing heavily upon everyone’s thoughts. But it is a peaceful meal and it feels right. When at last the father excuses himself as he must be about the morning’s chores and there is the donkey to be attended to. The boy rises to assist. “No” said the man, “you have done enough for one day, go get some sleep” The mother has already risen to start clearing the dishes. Turning to the girl she said, “leave this to me, go now to my bed and get some rest, you are no longer alone in your needs.” Turning to the boy she said “and you take her room. The bed is comfortable and you must be very tired.” “Thank you I am. Good night.” Drawing the curtains he lays down in the dark for the longest time. He just cannot reconcile the girl he knew as a child and this child woman he has seen over the last couple of months with the scandalous tales and behaviour that he is told is her way. What was his life to be now? He would be leaving this for the unknown. Alone again. Eventually he slept. The girl on the other hand went quickly to sleep but her dreams were troubled. She felt she was battling against a rushing tide trying to protect something clutched to her breast while the tide was trying to

tear it away. She awoke sweating, dark and unfamiliar, it took her a moment to get her bearings. It was still light outside, she could hear her mother bustling in the kitchen, she patted her stomach. “Hello my gift from God” she said. “Don’t you worry. I will hold you close during the worst storms. I will be there in your day and your night. You will never be alone. And you will be my consolation and my glory. A receiver of love in your youth and a giver of love in my old age.” Turning on her side she drifted into sleep. Chapter 27 weight of public opinion People notice that the boy is back. That the father no longer needs to borrow a donkey. They suspect that the girl is in her fathers house. The mother hears snide remarks when shopping, unusual silences. The father gets an order cancelled, then another. Things feel very uncomfortable. The girl is now in her 7th month. She hasn’t been outside the compound for many weeks. The boy says to the father “Its not good for her to be here locked away. The people of the village seem to delight in gossip. Every time he has to go about the village he can feel their stares and whisperings’. The feeling of being mocked and judged is so hard to accept. If he is having such a hard time dealing with the innuendo how much more difficult for the girl. He has heard that they are looking for carpenters for a project in the town of the auntie and uncle. Perhaps it would be good to take the girl back to their house where no one knows and where she can be free of the projected shame. Where the auntie is there to help her and where the uncle can get him employed on the project. This living in a fishbowl makes it hard to enjoy the sunshine. It would be good if they can leave this past behind.” The parents see that the girl is trying her best to accept her situation, she is struggling manfully to do her best for the household. If it was not for the love that she holds for the unborn child she could easily fall into a deep depression, a suicidal depression could easily overcome her. They are very worried for her. Their own misgivings about her behaviour as described by the priests begin to subside as they watch her going about the chores of the house, her dutifulness, the way she in moments alone speaks to the life growing within her, her resolution to protect and nurture this new life speaks volumes about a love that she has to give. They have also heard of a building project back in the city of the aunt. Her husband is well connected and will be able to secure a job for him. After all he’s going to have to leave sometime. Maybe now would be a good time for him to take the girl back to the aunts. Let her be in a secure environment. She and the auntie can help each other and it’ll give him somewhere to be while he establishes himself. And they shouldn’t wait. Every passing day makes the journey harder for her. This is a really difficult decision for the parents, she’s been gone so long but they also see that the pressure on her is taking its toll. So they agree. Chapter 28 back at the aunties and uncles The next morning

the boy and the pregnant girl leave for the city. Travelling in the cool of the mornings and late evenings and using a tent for the heat of the days they travel at a leisurely pace. A kindred companionship at shared tasks and purpose forms. They begin to chat easily and laugh, finding pleasure in the freedom of feeling unknown to the stares. No one to judge them. It's nice to be out of the harsh judgemental gaze, to feel free from the stares and whispering, to be in a company of care that they give to each other. They share the tasks that must be done while on the road. The girl never complains even though the boy can see that she tires easily and is often uncomfortable and he tries his best to ease the burden for her. After about 2 and a half weeks they arrive at their destination and are greeted joyfully by the aunt and uncle who had been concerned at their late arrival and ask if they have had any trouble on the journey. "No" said the boy "we have actually had a very nice trip. We travelled slowly as the girl tires easily and she has never complained and certainly carried her share of the tasks. Surprising how good a meal she can make on the road." "Well" says the auntie "I'm sure that it will do you good to take some rest, but before you do come and look at little John who is sleeping. You won't believe how much he has grown since you left. He's a lovely placid baby and so much fun to be with." "Never mind that" said the uncle, "My boy is a gift from God and destined to great things. I'm amazed at how much joy fatherhood has given me. Such a strapping lad". "Come boy, lets leave the ladies to their coo cooing, come into my room and we can talk and share a refreshing libation. I have been speaking to one of the foremen from the project and he says they can always use a competent carpenter. I hope your skills are as good as I have told him they are". "Well" said the boy, "I was taught by your brother in law and he always seems to be in demand for his skills and he has said that he thinks I am now good enough to be beyond his teaching. How that can be, I don't know? For everything I have learnt is from him. I think its just because I'm younger and stronger that makes it seem that I'm better, but he was a very good teacher. I know how to read a piece of wood to get the best from it. I'm sure that they won't be disappointed with my work. After all from here I have to make my own way in the world so it would be good to save up some travelling funds and to get some experience working on such a big project with so many other trades and people". "Good" said the uncle "I will take you down to meet the foreman for lunch tomorrow with a view to starting the day after. Will that be too soon? Would you rather rest a few days before plunging in"? "No" answered the boy. "Now that I have accepted that life has changed, and a new future has to be embraced I am eager to get started and see where God will lead me. "OK" said the uncle "after breakfast tomorrow I will take you to meet him. Bring some tools with

you just in case he wants to put you to a test. Go wash and go to bed now, its late and you must be very tired." The next morning when the boy rose he came into the kitchen to find the girl singing quietly and happily to herself as she ground the meal to make the breakfast cakes. The uncle was still sleeping and the aunt was busy feeding and caring for her child. "You seem very happy" said the boy to the girl "is pounding meal such a joyous task?" "Its not the task that makes me happy" replied the girl, "although its not so arduous when you are making it for those you love." "Does that include me?" questioned the boy taken aback. "You," said the girl, "have been amazing. I know what has happened. I know that you were pressured to condemn me and without my parents asking you decided that I and this child should be protected. It made my parents very happy even in what seemed to be such dark times. That took a lot of courage and has cost you a lot and yet even with that you have not reproached me but instead have done everything to harbour me. Such kindness is impossible to repay and I will be sorry to see you go, but while you are here I shall do my best to be of every assistance to you. Here, sit down, the tea is ready and here are some figs for you while I make the oatcakes. There is some honey to put on them so they will be sweet in your mouth." "Thanks" said the boy "I am hungry. Is there anything I can do to help? "I'm not made of sugar" said the girl, "I wont melt, please let me do what I can to make your days easier, you have done so much for us. Its the least I can do and it gives me pleasure to be able to do something in return. The cakes won't be a minute, I'll go and call uncle for breakfast." The uncle came into the room to find the breakfast on the table. The tea poured and a place ready. "Bloody hell" said the uncle "this is a change. Since the baby arrived I've had to wait for my breakfast till the wife has dealt with him. Then she hands him to me to play with while she makes the food. I must admit sometimes my belly is growling by the time food is on the table". The girl laughed, "don't you worry about that any more, as now there are two women who love you and would like to look after you. I'm going to see that your meals will be as good as I can make them and at the table on-time. Are you going to the worksite today?" "Yes immediately after breakfast" replied the uncle, "men are coming from everywhere for the work and we would hate to be too late to be selected." "Well eat up then" urged the girl, then turning to the boy she said "can you leave me your travel and work clothes, I know they are very dirty after our trip and I saw that there was some small repairs that need to be addressed. If you give them to me I will fix it today so you will be ready to start work tomorrow." "Don't go putting the cart before the horse" said the boy, "the jobs not mine yet." "Don't be silly" rejoined the girl, "If my dad says your good, then you are good and they will be fortunate to have you. Can I get you anything more?

Some tea perhaps, have you had enough to eat? I've made more so there's plenty." "Thanks" answered the boy "but I've already had four, any more and I will be too bloated to show them how I can work. It was delicious by the way. Come uncle, let us offer a prayer for success and I will gather my tools and we can be off." "Not before you bring me your washing and repairs" commanded the girl. "Gee your a bossy taskmaster" said the boy "but anything for the peace. I will go and get them". He returned shortly with a clothes bundle and his tool bag ready to go, the uncle was outside feeding the chickens and goat. "Before you go" said the girl, "put these biscuits in your bag, you don't know how long it will take on a busy site like that and you may get peckish. I made these a bit earlier with sesame seeds and honey so they will give you energy if you feel your flagging. I know God is going to repay you for your kindness and faithfulness, so go knowing that you will carry my blessing and that of my unborn babe. We owe you so much". "Listen girl" he said, "put no onus of duty or cost on what I have done. It is less than your parents have done for me. You will be happy and safe here with your uncle and aunt, nobody here knows your story, You will be safe in this compound and you two women will be a big help to each other. Hopefully I will be working all hours putting together my future stake and your uncle is about to go on his rotation with the temple so she will be glad of the company and help. Thanks again for the food it was great. Bye now." As he turned to leave he felt her hand take his and turning towards her she lifted his hand to her lips. Placing a quick kiss upon it she said "I couldn't send you off without a kiss for luck, thank you again for everything you have done." "Bye" said the boy gruffly, "I'll let you know how it goes. Bye" Chapter 29 the interview The uncle and the boy set out towards the building site, the sun was still low in the sky, the air still cool, an early morning rain has dampened the dust and the two men walked companionably along the road. "Tell me about the man we're going to meet" said the boy. "Well he's an old friend, I have circumcised his two boys and buried his father. He's getting on a bit now, not as old as me but he and I are good friends. I'm sure he will like you." The walk to the project took about 45 mins. The sun had risen, and the heat from it was chasing away the chill of the day. "Remember to keep water with you" said the uncle, "it can get very hot here and working exposed to the day sometimes causes men to faint if they don't have enough water with them. I know most of your work has been in workshops so this will be harder, which is why they are paying such a good rate. You will stay with us for free and I won't have it any other way. You were a good help to us last time you were here and it costs us so little to keep you and your such good company and help. Last time when you came I was in a bad place, and there was something about the way you contained your own pain and reached out that

really helped me with the thoughts I was carrying. Its funny, out of the wrong came something sweet, out of the pain came something great. I'm probably the happiest I've ever been in my life. Whoda thunk it! Ahh here we are, let me ask around for my friend. Wait here." The boy placed his bag under a tree and sat down to wait. All around him was hustle and bustle. There were people making bricks, moving stones and scaffolding around. Men shouting, occasional laughter, often grunting and cursing. The sun rose and the heat grew. Carts came and went bringing loads and taking loads away. The place was a hive of activity. He looked around with awe. Sure, he and the girl's father had built houses and stores before but never on this scale and for the last few years they had concentrated more on cabinet making as the father's leg made site work difficult for him. Over the back he saw a shanty town, smoke coming from lots of cooking fires, there were women and children there. He could see them playing, washing, gossiping, arguing. This must be the workers quarters he thought to himself. I wonder where all these people came from?. "Boy boy" he heard the uncle call "come over here and meet my friend that I have told you about." Gathering up his bag he hurried over to be greeted by a bear of a man with a fine black beard touched with a wisp of grey. Large calloused hands took his and shook it firmly. "So your the carpenter my friend has for me. Your not from these parts are you? Don't worry about that. We have many people who have come from far away so you will hear many accents and languages and customs that are unfamiliar. You'll get used to it. We work from 6 am to 6pm with a short morning break then an hour at lunch and a late afternoon break so it can be quite taxing if your not used to it. Many come here looking for jobs and there are many who claim to have a skill that's not evident in their work, so we have to be quite ruthless with those who only come to eat from our table, who spend their nights with much wine and are no use in the morning. There can be no favours here, we have a schedule and are fined for missing targets, so reliability is very important for us. There are always more applicants than jobs so the deadwood is quickly weeded out. Keep that in mind." "Now as a favour to my old friend I have kept a job open for you. He says your a master carpenter. Is that true?" "I don't know" said the boy, "I was taught by his brother in law since I was twelve and really know no other trade. People seem pleased with my work, but a master carpenter is not for me to say. But I can promise this. If you give me the job, I will do my best to make you feel it was a good decision". "Refreshing change to have someone not blowing their own trumpet. Lets see what you know. I want to make a small arch for that window over there. Don't worry about measuring it, what I want you to do is to go to the woodpile over there and select the pieces of wood that you would choose to make it". "OK" said the boy?" Is the

arch pointed or rounded?" "A pointed arch will go there. When you have finished bring the pieces to me. We will go to the tea shop over there. Bring it to us when you are ready." The boy went over to the woodpile. Nearby was a team sawing stuff into boards and beams. There was a range of sizes and thicknesses and he was easily able to find a piece for the base and uprights but the grain was too straight for the curves. It was beautiful timber, better stock than he usually had access to, except for the best and most expensive pieces of furniture. And the pieces where he felt the grain was suitable for the curve carried such a lot of waste. Then he saw it the discard pile. Moving over to it he was amazed at the wastage. Sorting through it he found exactly the piece he was looking for. A bit bent and twisted but he could see that the grain curved in exactly the right way. Taking it and a straight bit of lumber he went to look for the two men. Found them sitting talking. They spotted him and called him over. "Show me what you have chosen" said the foreman, the boy held up the two pieces of lumber. "I can understand the board said the foreman but what is the discard you're carrying. Were there no other choices? "Yes" said the boy "but the pieces that had the right grain twist for the curves were large pieces with a lot of wastage and as the window you showed me was only small, I looked in the discards and found this which is ideal. If I shape it this way the grain will run along the curve and it will not split or break or warp. I can splice it into the straight lumber and it will do handsomely". The foreman watched the boy trace out how he would fashion the wood. "Well I'll be, you can certainly read the grain and its not often we get people with an eye for wastage and cost. That's good enough for me. Your work will prove your skills, but I have seen enough to give you a start. Be here early and I'll introduce you around and get you started. Tomorrow at 5.30am here. I will find you. If you like you can leave your tools here, they will be safe and it'll save you having to carry them home and back. It'll also mean that your hands are free in the morning to bring any more kit you may have. Well old friend, I must be back to work, there will be many who need guidance. I've been gone too long and they will start to tarry if I'm not there to harangue them." "Thank you sir" said the boy "I will do my best not to disappoint you." "I expect no less" replied the man. "Now go, there is work afoot." Chapter 30 Things are looking up Capítulo 30 Las cosas mejoran The uncle and the boy set off for home. The boy can't believe his luck. A job on his first day without even taking a tool from his bag. What a lucky break that he had been taught in a shop where every piece counted and wastage couldn't be accommodated. The uncle asked him what had happened, he had expected the boy to have to show that he was competent with a tool in his hand. "What was this about reading the grain, surely there was nothing written on it." "No" laughed the

boy. “The biggest skill when working with timber is knowing how it will move and twist. You need a piece that is amenable to the shape you want. The wrong piece may look fine when new but in the heat, rain and sunshine the grain will open and twist, but with the right grain it will tighten and make the piece even stronger over time.” “I didn’t know that” said the uncle. “Must be why I’m a priest. Come, let us go home and buy a small skin of wine this calls for a celebration.” Arriving home about 2 pm they found the girl in the yard hanging out washing. “Hey how did it go” called the girl, “although I already know you got the job because I have faith.” “Your right” laughed the boy, “All I had to do was select some pieces of timber to make a small arch and when I choose them he was happy that I had chosen a discard that was perfect for the curve. Didn’t even have to pick up a tool. Thank you uncle for your good word.” “I didn’t give a good word” said the uncle “our conversation was about this not being a favour, you had to get it on your own merit. I must admit when we saw the timber you were bringing I thought why did you have that bent piece, surely there were better to choose from, and he said as much. Then when you showed him why you had bought that piece and how you were going to work it he was very impressed. You did this on your own boy. “ I’ve bought some wine to celebrate. “Well come inside” beckoned the girl “I have hot food ready for you and have made bread which is fresh. Auntie has taken the baby and gone to market. she’ll be back later.” They washed for lunch went inside to find the table ready with bowls spoons and cups, fresh bread and a stew pot steaming with a delicious smell. The smell made the boys mouth water and he realised that he was very hungry. She served them both. “Eat now and take some rest I will hear all the news at supper tonight when you share it with auntie.” They went back to eating while the girl went back to hanging out the laundry. When she returned she had in her hand the boys work clothes. “Gee you can get things dirty” said the girl “took a bit of scrubbing but now they’re clean, so you can make a good impression tomorrow. I’ve just a small patch to put to it and a seam to stitch and it’ll be ready for you in the morning”. Turning to the boy she said “I’m so proud of you”. Blushing under the praise the boy made his excuses and went to go lay down. He was still a little tired from the journey and he wanted to be alert for the next day. Laying down he tried to think about the job but all that came to his mind was the touch of her hand in the morning and the pleasure he felt at her praise. Presently he fell asleep. When he awoke it was getting dark. Rising hurriedly he made his way into the kitchen, opening the door he was greeted by shouts of “surprise”. On the table was a small feast, fruits, cakes, a broth with steamed meat, wine and bread. “Com’on sleepy head” laughed the girl. “Your the guest of honour tonight. Take a seat at the table and I will serve you

while auntie serves uncle." "Where is the child" asked the boy. "I've put him down for a nap" said the auntie. "He will wake presently for his evening feed, but for now let us pray and give thanks and you can tell us all about it between mouthfuls." The uncle uttered a prayer while they all joined hands. The boy didn't notice the prayer, he was too conscious of the warmth of the girls hand and how it felt in his and he thought of all of his dreams of yesterday and how they were gone. It made him feel sad, the dashed dreams he had entertained. He pushed the thoughts away and listened while the uncle told the aunt all of the events of the day. "It's a happy day" said the auntie, "what did you think of the project?" "Well its so big" said the boy "I'm sure I'll get lost. There are people from all about, and there is a workers village nearby. Some men have even bought families. "They're not all families" cautioned the uncle, "a lot of the women are widows who follow the camps doing such chores that the men need, laundry, cooking, other services. Its rough on them but at least they are fed and have somewhere to sleep. The camps can be a rough mob and fights are common and carousing regular. Its not as easy to live in the camps as you might think. Don't be too eager to leave. Even with the extra walk you may find it easier to be here". "We'll see how it goes" said the boy, "I don't want to burden you and I have to start to make my way. The uncle went to press some more wine on the boy but he declined. "I have to be up very early I the morning and I must pack the rest of my tools. If you don't mind I will go back to bed." "What time do you have to leave" asked the girl. "About 4.30" answered the boy. "With this load I will need to allow an hour to get there". "Ok" said the girl, "I haven't quite finished the mending, but when you come in for breakfast I will leave them in a pile here for you". "Thanks" said the boy. Going into the outer room where he was sleeping he busies himself with packing up his tools into an easy to carry bundle. Looking up at the stars he prayed in his heart. "Thank you God, you have opened doors for me. May I be worthy of you." He lay down to sleep. His last thought before sleep was of how her hand had felt in his while praying. Chapter 31 First day Capítulo 31 Primer día The next morning he woke early, first cock crow. Rising quickly he did his ablutions and going into the kitchen to collect his clothes he found the girl with the fire lit, the lamp glowing, the table set for one and the smell of cooking. "Ah your here" said the girl "I was just about to come and wake you. Sit at the table, hot breakfast is ready. Shall I pour your tea?" "You don't have to do this" said the boy. "Some bread and fruit is all I need". "Nonsense" retorted the girl, "a man needs a proper breakfast if he is to work well. Let me at least do that for you". When he had finished breakfast she handed him a lunch packet. "This is for lunch and there are some sweet cakes for the other breaks. Have a good day". The boy left just as light was

beginning to break. His clothes felt marvellous and the patch she had put was almost invisible. The dawn chorus was in full swing and he felt his heart lift up to God. First day of the rest of my life, he couldn't quite understand why that thought made him a little uncomfortable. Don't be silly he said to himself remembering the frightened boy he once was. I no longer have to be afraid, I'm big and strong and have a good trade. Once his stake was made he could go and see the world, maybe even find a nice place to settle down start his own business, build a house then he could think of finding a wife and starting a family. But for now those dreams of the future would have to wait. First things first. Arriving at the worksite he went to wait as instructed and before too long the foreman arrived. "Well your punctual at least" he said. "The camps had a party last night so we may be short of workers in the early part of the day. I have decided to put you with a team of board cutters. It's not the best team and we don't give them the best grade. It will be your job to assess the stuff, decide how best it can be prepared for the greatest yield and to oversee the preparations. You will have to account for the logs and the output. You can read and write can't you". "Yes" said the boy "I can do numbers as well". "Great" said the foreman "here is a slate and chalk, keep good records." "Over here is where your team will be. Let me show you around". Taking him to some logs he said. "Look over and mark each piece, try not to waste too much. You will have 8 men to whom you are responsible. Their wages are determined on output and wastage so your job will really affect their earnings. You're so young that they may wish to resent you so you will have to win them over if your going to forge a good team. You're not the boss! but the cutting will be under your direction. Do your best and I'll check on you at the end of the day. Let me introduce you, here they are." "Hi men, this is the new cutting director for your team. He'll mark the timbers for you to cut. If he turns out to be as good as I think he'll be, you will all make more money. Make his life easy. Now get to work. These are marked out from yesterday so you can start immediately. By the time you've finished that he will have more marked out. Having introduced themselves they set about work, 2 men to a saw, 3 saws and another two with adzes stripping the bark of the unmarked logs. The boy watched them for a moment as they set about work. He then went to the log pile and selecting his first log began to study the grain and the shakes. It was generally good timber and he marked up the first few quickly enough. Between logs he watched them work. First thing he noticed was that the teams were unevenly matched. He thought to himself, I think they would do better if we matched manpower to each side of the saw. Morning break came and they sat down to smoke, drink water and eat from their supper bags. They talked and joked among themselves and he watched how they interacted.

After break he went back to his task and they commenced to start cutting the timbers he had marked. He watched the guys with the adzes, their swing was uncoordinated, and took a lot of power from their blade, often striking too hard or too soft. They were obviously experienced but he felt he could certainly improve their output with a little instruction. He would wait until they included him in their conversations before making suggestions. He didn't want to offend them. Lunchtime came and he had marked nearly all the prepared logs. Those doing the sawing had plenty to get on with so needed no guidance. Looking over he saw that one of the bark shedder's was tiring visibly. Putting down his slate, he went over to him and said. "It's a hot day and you have been toiling under the sun. Take a small break and get a drink and sit in the shade for a few moments to regain your strength. You will do better when you are feeling a little fresher. Give me your adze and I will cover for you." Gratefully the man handed over the adze and moved over to the shade of the tree. The boy took up the adze and taking position over the log started to strip the bark. Years of preparing the stuff had given him a style of his own and he was able to strip fairly quickly. He didn't just work from one spot but moved around the log to find the best faces to work, not a traditional pattern, but it was obviously a faster system and he quickly outpaced the other barker. Shortly after the first barker returned. Handing him back the adze he said to the barker. "If you like, I can show you another way of doing this which is quicker and easier and you will find less tiring, but the biggest difference will be how you sharpen the adze. It's near end of day so when we finish take your adze home and sharpen it. It will make your job so much easier. Its better to work smart than to work hard." He had hardly finished talking when the foreman came over. "Lets see your tally sheets" he said. The boy handed him the slate. "Hmmm" said the foreman "it's better than yesterday". Going over to the sawn lumber he inspected it. Nodding his head he went to the discard pile to find that it was smaller than yesterday. More lumber, less stuff and less discards. This boy really did know his onions. Returning to the boy he said, "Not a bad first day. Have the lads been good to you". "No trouble at all" said the boy. "Are they purposely arranged in the teams they are? Can I suggest balancing out the manpower on the saws? I think they would find it easier if they were more evenly matched. As it is, one is sometimes dragging the other. After all, sawing wood isn't really about strength its about consistency. "Glad you noticed" said the foreman. "You may offer them any advice you think fit. They might not thank you, you being of such a young age and many of them have been going from job to job for years and think they know it all. Don't alienate them or they will make your life difficult. We get the best results from teams that work happily together."

“Thank you” said the boy, “I’ll keep that in mind”. Setting off home he felt it had been a good day. Sure they had been a little standoffish, to be expected on a first day, but he felt he had worked well and there seemed to be a lot of room for improvement. If he was able to show them that his ways were faster and easier would they respond? After all, We are paid on lumber less wastage. Would the prospect of more money be enough to sway them? Chapter 32 End of day Capítulo 32 Fin del día Arriving at the compound he opened the gate to find the girl playing with the now crawling child. They didn’t see him and he watched quietly as they played together. She seemed a natural with the child who looked very happy. Hearing the creak of the gate she turned to see him. “Your back” she said happily. “Aunt and uncle have gone to prayers and I’m looking after John. They will be back a little late but I have supper waiting for you. Please wash up and I’ll set the table”. Scooping up the baby to her hip the heavily pregnant girl went inside cooing softly to the child. The boy came into the kitchen. It was cool after the heat of the day and as he sat down she handed him a drink, “its lime juice, it will refresh you, there’s fresh bread, dhall, some aubergine, and 2 eggs. I have already eaten with aunt and uncle but if you like I can nurse the baby at the table and you can tell me all about the day. How was it?” “Amazing” said the boy, “when I got there the foreman put me to work with a team turning logs into boards.” “That sounds like hard graft” opined the girl, “sawing big logs all day”. “It is” answered the boy “but that wasn’t my job. It seems that my skills at reading a log are the big demand. Its all about getting the most timber and the least wastage. Something your father was very big on. After his accident it became important to reduce wastage to a minimum and he taught me to look at the grain and shakes and to get the most out of a piece of wood. The foreman came at the end of the day to collect my tally sheet and he seemed happy enough. I mentioned a couple of ideas I had to speed things up and he seemed pleased. Told me to assist them in any way I could but to be careful not to appear like an upstart. Seems they can be a bit touchy” “Did you have any trouble” asked the girl. “No” replied the boy, “I did do a little work though, one of the barkers was flagging and as I was ahead I told him to take a break, drink some water and I would cover for him”. “How did that go” the girl asked? “Well the adze was a bit blunt and when I was small and would be helping your dad I found an easier pattern for stripping bark as I wasn’t so strong then. I’ve refined it over the years and now find it the quickest. I’ve asked him to sharpen his adze tonight and I’ll see if he is happy to show me in the morning. Think he was glad of the break. We’ll see tomorrow”. “Let me pour you a wine, sit outside and have a smoke, I’ll feed and change the baby and put him to bed. I’ve made up your room with fresh bedding and your clothes are ready.” Sitting

outside under the stars he took a sip of wine and lit a smoke and gazing up at the stars he felt a real peace. “Lord thank you for all you have done. When I was beaten you arranged succor, a family, a career and a promise. Well that promise is gone but the hope remains. Their faith has been good to me. Can’t say the same about their church, so maybe there is another way of understanding it. I give you thanks for the kindnesses they have shown me. I know I am supposed to feel aggrieved. And that the future I dreamed of is gone and a new future must beckon, so I am going to put my trust in your hands. Please be kind to the girl and her coming child. I don’t believe the stories they tell, even though she agrees they are true. There is something more going on here. Innocence such as hers is easy to take advantage of. I have only seen her good. I remember being abused, a different abuse but still abuse. My body was abused and for her it was her innocence and her trust. My body has healed, I mean there are scars, but I’m stronger for them. She’s different from the girl in the inn or the camp followers. She has found a way to reconcile, rejoice and her trust in god is unimpaired even though she has been under constant threat, vilified, ridiculed and deceived. She greets the days joyfully, tackles her tasks with pride and is so helpful. Make some man a wonderful wife he thought wryly. “ Well anyway father, the future beckons and I have a task tomorrow”. Lying back he re-ran the work in his mind. Chapter 33 the picnic Capítulo 33 el picnic Next morning he awoke with the first cock crow. The temperature was pleasant, he felt refreshed, he had ideas for the day. Getting out of bed he pulled on his work-clothes from the previous day. Crossing the yard to the kitchen he could see the glow of a flame. Opening the door he found the girl fanning the fire into flame. “Ohh your early” she exclaimed, “I didn’t think you would need to leave for nearly an hour.” “I fancied in getting in early, I’ve a couple of ideas I’d like to do. Need to make a good impression”. “ I haven’t yet made your lunch.” “Never mind” he said “Ill just grab some cheese and olives. Are there any figs?” “No” said the girl “there’s some bread”. “That’ll do” he said. “Well at least have a cup of tea before you go” she said “waters on the boil. While your drinking that I can make some eggs and toast. It’ll be ready before you finish your tea. What are your plans”. The boy tells her about his ideas briefly. Finishing his eggs he rises from the table. “I’ll take my set stone in today. It will help with tool sharpening. Make life easier all round. Thanks for breakfast” He sets off to work and the girl busies herself preparing food for the others, cleaning in the kitchen and other chores. While the oats are cooking she goes out to feed the chickens and milk the goat. Returning inside she finds auntie, uncle and baby John sitting in the kitchen, drinking tea and nursing. “Well you’ve been up early” they said, “has the boy gone so early”? Yes” she replies “I got up to make him

breakfast and was going to make him a lunch packet but he decided to go early so I didn't have time to get him more than some eggs and toast. For lunch he's taken only enough for a snack. I wish I had known earlier I could have been prepared." "You worry about him" questioned the aunt? "He's been so good to me" said the girl "even though I have caused him so much hurt and disappointment. He's come to my aid and protection, and has shown care for me without judgement. There were many who used me, debased me, who would do anything to protect their own position, and yet he used his position to protect me. That's a big difference". "Why don't you make him a lunch packet" suggested the aunt, "uncle can take you to the site and you can see for yourself where he is working. Its a big project. In fact the walk will do me good and John can get the fresh air, why don't we all go. We can take picnic and have lunch with him". "What a good idea" agreed the uncle. "If we go with plenty of time we can have a look around. Its fascinating and very cosmopolitan. So many people from so many places. If we leave about ten we will have time to look around before lunch. It may take us some time to find him as well. I'll go do my chores." They set out and walk at a leisurely pace, the babe strapped to the aunt's back and the uncle carrying the picnic. The day is warming but a gentle breeze is coming off the lake and is refreshingly cool. After about an hour they arrive at the site. "It's so big" exclaims the girl. The uncle starts to point out the various parts of the site, the brick making, woodworking, stone-carving and other areas. He points out the workers settlements and tells them all he knows about the site. Presently they spot the boy working with his team." Wait here" says the uncle," I will go and tell him we are here and ask when he will break for the lunch and where to meet up with us." Leaving the women under the shade of a tree, he goes over to the team. The boy sees him and comes over. "Is something wrong uncle" he asks. "No boy The girl was upset that you went off to work without lunch. She had gotten up early just to make sure that everything was ready for you but you had decided to go in early and she hadn't had time to prepare a lunch for you. So to humour her we have decided to bring you a picnic lunch. After all, the girls are curious about this place and your new job and wanted to see so it seemed like a good idea. Two birds with one stone. You get lunch and they get to see. When will you break for lunch?" " I think the guys on the saws will want to break when they finish the logs they're on, so about 45 mins. " Great" said the uncle. "See that tall tree over there, pointing to it. We will be there" . A short while later the boy joins the group. "Well this is a pleasant surprise" he says, "I was prepared to be a little hungry". "Why did you want to come in early" asked the uncle. "Well" replied the boy, "when I was working yesterday I saw that there were a couple of improvements that I could make that would

make life easier and hence we would process more stuff and make more money. So I came in early to put an edge on the adze the other barker was using. I find that if I change the angle a couple of degrees it makes lighter work". "How did it go" inquired the uncle. "Very well, the other barker sharpened his adze last night to their normal face and they were able to compare how the difference was. They seemed pretty pleased, we've gained half a log this morning over yesterday. This afternoon I'm going to suggest to the sawyers that there is a different set I can put to their saws which is faster on rough sawn. It's a trick her dad showed me and it's good. I'll do a set for one of the teams and they can compare". "Pleased to see that your fitting in well" said the uncle. They talked through the lunch and when it was time to go back to work they bade him goodbye. Back at home the girl helped around the house with the chores. Chapter 34 Settling in Capítulo 34 Instalándose That night when the boy got home he found his bed made, his clothes cleaned and a dinner waiting for him. The uncle had gone off to the temple to prepare for his next attendance, and the aunt was resting. "You don't have to do all this for me" he said to the girl, "you should be taking some rest too". " I'm good" the girl replied, "the walking really helps and it was fascinating to see the works. How are the men you work with, do you get on well?" "Actually, they have been most welcoming. I was a little worried that they would think I am an upstart, they having been doing this job for so long and me suggesting that there are some changes that we could make but they were very pleased that my ideas were making it a little easier and faster and asked if I had some other suggestions. I told them about the set for the saws and suggested that they rearrange their saw partner to get a better balance. At first they said that they had been working in pairs for a long time, but they agreed to try my ideas and see how they worked out. After all everybody wants to make more money. When the day was over we had improved on yesterday and worked a little less hard. The foreman was pleased as well. Tonight I'm going to apply the set to the saw I've bought home and we'll see how much they like it". "How does it work" asked the girl. The boy explained how the set cut rough sawn faster but wasn't as good for finish work. If all went well, he was confident that they would improve by at least a log a day. That, added to the less wastage meant they could earn as much as 10% more a week. Having finished his meal he goes out to set the saw teeth. The girl starts cleaning up. Some time later she came to him bringing a cup of tea. "Your working so hard" she said. "Take a break". "Thanks" said the boy" I'm just so keen to make a good impression." "Well" inquired the girl," are you going to go in so early tomorrow?" "No need" said the boy, "I could use the extra hours sleep. The saw is done and we'll see how the guys like it." "Ok" said the girl, "I've made

you a lunch packet for lunch tomorrow and I'll have breakfast ready for you in the morning". "No need for that" said the boy." Just leave something out and I'll help myself. You should be resting more." "Actually" said the girl, "I'm pleased to be up early, this baby doesn't like to let me rest in the mornings. So I'm glad to get up with something to do. After all, its mostly what I've been doing for the last few years in the temple. So it seems natural for me. And you've been so good that I like to do it for you. I've enjoyed our chats. Having been in cloister for so long it nice to talk to you. you've never judged me, I know you have been hurt by my actions and I'm sorry about that". "Well" said the boy "I've also suffered by the actions of others and if it hadn't been for your parents I don't know what would have happened to me. As it is, I now have a future as a tradesman. So all's good. It will be hard for you once the baby is born and you have to go back to your parents. People will forget over time and the baby will be a great joy to your parents. At this the girl went quiet. "I was so sure that I had been selected by God. I allowed my wishes to deceive me. But I'm sure that this child will come and bring its love with it. Strange how the future can change so suddenly. Still I trust in God and know he will make everything right. Sometimes I think what if, and then I see that there are many paths to take. So trust seems to be the only sensible path. I better go to bed now, you should get some rest too. It can't be easy working through the heat of the day. Goodnight." Chapter 35 wisdom from the camps Capítulo 35 sabiduría de los campamentos The next morning the boy came into the kitchen to find hot porridge with raisins in it, some toast and a boiled egg and tea ready. He and the girl chatted amiably through the meal and then he set off for work. The day went well, his suggestions were listened to, and the crew were happy with the changes he had suggested and that night they had improved their tally. So this went on for several days. The men now asked the boy for suggestions and during the day a friendly mateship grew between the team. Steadily the tally improved. Over the next weeks they started to talk about life on the site. One of the men was married with two children and they lived in the camp. They talked about the camp and the camp followers. It seemed that a couple of the men had developed friendly relations with some of the female camp followers. The camp worked like a small town. It had bakeries, bathhouses, brothels and more. There was even a rudimentary school for the children. One morning the girl said, "I haven't made you lunch. I'm hoping you will let me bring it to you. I could use the walk and the chance to get out." "Are you sure" questioned the boy, "it's a long walk in the hot sun." "I will take my time" responded the girl, "after all its easier than carrying water and I've been inside so long its nice to get out and about". " Ok" agreed the boy "will you remember how to find me." " Yes" replied the girl, "the tree

we had lunch under is easy to spot and its shady and cool and I can see all around what's happening so I wont be bored waiting. Are your sure it'll be ok." "Yes" enthused the boy" I'll look forward to it." After lunch the guys asked about the girl, "Whose the pretty girl bringing you lunch, is it your girlfriend?" Smirks and nudges. "You going to be a daddddy." "No" said the boy "she is the daughter of the man who taught me carpentry. We are living at her in-laws. "Well she is certainly nice to you" said one of the team who was married. "I'm married to a woman whose husband died leaving her with two young children and she ended up in the camp. It's a hard life for a woman in the camp, not everyone is respectful and they are sometimes compromised by the need to provide, and a lot of the blokes can be rough and abusive and treat them shamelessly. When I met my wife she had been beaten up by one of the men because she didn't want to accommodate him. But I got to know her and she asked for so little and tried to do so much. It's hard to live in camp alone, fine for the roughnecks but so much easier if you are two. And so much cheaper and it makes it so much easier not to spend all your money on drink and stuff. I wouldn't still be here without her help, and its nice to have a semblance of home. Not as lonely, and there's other attractions. Course she's not as pretty as your girl but I'm glad that I took the risk with her, and the kids are fine, quite growing on me. The nice thing about the camps is your past doesn't matter. Everybody takes things at face value. She does seem sweet on you. I have to go to the camp for lunch, I don't get a picnic under a tree." The others laughed, made jokes and gently ribbed him about it, but it was all good natured. The men shared stories about how they came to be on site. A couple had done it all their lives and one of them had grown up in the camps. Its not the easiest life travelling form job to job. Gradually they shared stories. The girl came most days now, the boy looked forward to lunch and he loved how she listened to him as he told her of his days and plans. One day the guy who had married the camp follower said. "I know this sounds strange but you should marry that girl. She's very good to you and in this life it's much better. Most of us are here because we made mistakes or something happened to us but to have a willing partner is a big bonus. Its not what went before that makes the difference but how you deal with the now. Life isn't always perfect but it is easier with help. That night after supper the boy was sitting out under the stars, drinking wine and smoking. Work was going well, the previous day the foreman had said that the team had improved so much that they had risen in the ranks, he was going to move their team up to a better position, it would mean better logs to cut and a slightly better rate to go with the new position. He and the guys were very happy, better wages better logs a real team spirit. And the craic was good which made the days easier. He thought about life in

the camps. It wasn't the same as he had envisioned a future but it wasn't all bad. He thought about the girl back in her fathers compound and he was a little sad for her. She was getting close now, only about another month and the baby would come and she would have to go back to her parents. Little John was now nearly walking, well crawling very fast and he could see how much pleasure the aunt and uncle got from him. Chapter 36 conversation with uncle Capítulo 36 conversación con el tío That night he had a dream, in the dream he was with the girl and her babe and it felt good and when he awoke he felt sad. He had the day off, it was the Sabbath. That day he couldn't help but feel a little anxious for the future, but he tried to keep a cheerful face as he escorted the two women to the temple. Letting them go to the women's section he took his place among the men. Uncle was leading and as it was his last day of his tour of duty and he would be accompanying them home for the ritual meal. When the service was over the boy asked the women if they would be OK to go home without him. He would accompany the uncle home when he had signed off. They agreed and said they would have everything ready. When the uncle came out he was surprised to see the boy. "Didn't you go with the ladies" he asked? "Actually" said the boy "I stayed behind because I was hoping to talk to you. I would value your council." "Sure" said the uncle, "we can talk on the way home and as I'm a bit early we could stop for a cheeky libation. I know a nice spot where we won't be disturbed. So what's on your mind?" "Tell me" asked the boy, "are you happy?" "What do you mean" said the uncle. "Well" ventured the boy, "I know your story. After all I was here. How do you deal with what happened?" "Shit that's deep" responded the uncle. "If you had asked me a year ago my answer would have been very different. Then I felt cheated and it was very hard for a period. I even cursed God for what happened. I mean, I know what happened and how my wife chose to deal with it and I still felt a bit betrayed. Without the grace that God gave me in the sanctuary I might not have found a way to deal with it. It was hard to understand my wife's pain, but I've had a lot of time to reflect over it, and I see now that she was motivated by a love and duty for me. She couldn't help what happened at the beginning and although she wanted to be a mother, without John she might never have been able to be wife to me as she has now become. Funnily enough, as I have tried to understand her position I've grown to love her even more and we are much closer and I know that when we go to bed tonight we will reach for each other with joy. John has bought so much into our lives. My wife has gone from being a possession to a partner. Its a lot better though I wouldn't have believed it. Why do you ask?" "I had a dream last night" said the boy, "in it the girl was with me and there was a child as well and it felt good. When I awoke the memory of the dream made

me a little sad." "Do you like the girl?" asked the uncle. "Well she's kind, very helpful, listens to me when I talk of future plans, doesn't complain, and she can be very funny, she's well educated. I remember when we first came here after the trek and one night I was lying in bed I thought she would make a good wife for somebody without our history. We were betrothed when she was only 10, then she had no say and everything was mapped out. That's why she was sent to the convent. To learn all the skills for our life. Seems she learnt a bit much and that future was dashed. I had resigned myself to fate. Now because of events we have spent a lot of time together and I've become very fond of her but the child is not mine and she didn't have circumstances forced upon her. I mean she doesn't even know who could be the father of the child. She was happy to be every-bodies plaything." "Yeah I know. Listen! I want to share some things with you. It's not as uncommon as you think. Things happen to boys as well as girls. Generally we keep it pretty hush hush and the authorities usually try to make the problem go away quietly. We lie to pretend it doesn't happen but it does. People are weak and often led astray especially when they are young. She's paid a big price for what happened and you also have had to pay a price." "But what has happened to me gives me another perspective. I know couples who seem to do everything right and on the face of it all seems perfect, and yet their still not really together. In fact my wife and I both fitted that description once. I mean it was OK, nothing to complain about, she tried to be a good and obedient wife and did all her wifely duties but somehow this fire we have had to go through has made us stronger. Now I think about her, I didn't so much before. Before she was like the clothes I wore, now she's like my arm. I have learnt this. John will never know any father but me and I think of him as my natural son, and I mean he could be but that is bye the bye. We are a family in every sense of the word. I never thought about my wife's loneliness before, now I can see how hard it was for her. Hiding herself away in her barren shame. I was only sorry for myself having a barren wife. Well maybe that was my fault, I don't think about it any more, I'm glad for what we have. Maybe this is how God works." The past has to be forgiven if life is to be embraced. What's really on your mind?" "One of the guys I work with is married to one of the camp followers, a widow with 2 children. He knows how she survived before they met and the hardships she had to endure. They met after she had been beaten up by a guy whose advances she tried to refuse. But they got together anyway and he says its the best decision he ever made. They rib me about the girl in a good natured way, not like the malice that we had in her home village. We've both had it tough. If it wasn't for her parents, who knows what would have happened to me." "I can't tell you what to do" advised the uncle, "this must be a decision you

make. If you cannot leave the past behind don't carry it forward into the future. A woman will do anything for her child. It's the strongest bond of all. Never come between that. If you have a mind to consider the girl, its obvious that she thinks highly of you. She shows a maturity beyond her years. She's great with John and you can feel a deep bond with the child she is carrying and she will be a great mother. But don't compound the problem, if you don't feel that you can let the past be the past don't push that forward, better her fathers home than regrets." "Thank you" said the boy, "you've been a great help. Her father taught me that it is possible to love another man's child and I hardly remember my own parents now." "Well if your going to do something about it" said the uncle "you had better get a move on. We've had word that there is to be a census and we must go to the place of our fathers to be counted. She will have to go back very soon unless she goes with you and it will all be different then. Com'on lets go home the girls will be wondering what has happened to us." Arriving home they found everything ready, candles lit, meal laid out. "Boy" said the uncle "why don't you lead the prayers tonight." As he recited the homily he sensed a real peace overtake him. Finishing the meal he helped the girl do the dishes and clean up while the uncle and aunt took the baby outside to play. They could hear them chatting and playing outside and it seemed idyllic. Chapter 37 the proposal Capítulo 37 la propuesta "I was wanting to talk to you" ventured the boy shyly." I have been thinking a lot over the past months. I know this may seem sudden, but do you think you could grow to love me? I've certainly became very fond of you. Life is hard to be alone in. Would you marry me?" The girl drops the plate she is drying. "Ohh" she said "I've not dared to think about it. I know the shame I bought you, and there has never been anyone who treated me as tenderly as you, and I know what a real man you can be, unlike the others, but you can't marry me, I mean I'm not alone, I come as a pair, not yet, but very soon. Can you love us without reserve? Would you be able to hold your head up in our town. It might be too much to ask? "Girl" he said "we wouldn't be going back to your town, I have heard that they are looking for tradesmen in Egypt, It doesn't start for a few months, but I'm certain to get a start. First I have to go to Bethlehem. Your uncle has arranged for me to be counted among those descendants of David for a census that has to be obeyed. If you came to me as wife you wouldn't have to go home. You could leave it all behind. We could start a new life fresh with a clean slate. Nobody would know." "And what of my parents" said the girl. "Would they never get to meet the grandchild? They can't travel and they are stuck there. I would be happy to be your wife, to go where you go and to share life with you, but not in disgrace, not without my head held high." "I was undone in the temple and

left with child. My aunt has convinced me that the child is the redemption. If I go with you as wife when the child is born will you take me and the baby to my parents house so that my child can be admitted into the temple for consecration? The temple may have done me wrong, but the faith has not. They need to see that love has redeemed me, that we have risen above. They need to bless the child they tried to curse. My parents need to hold my child. And not everybody at the temple is bad. If it hadn't been for the old man coming and telling me what was being planned, the authorities would have locked me away and disposed of the child and so hidden their sin. And the old woman, she helped me away and put me on the path to my uncles. God is sometimes found in the humblest of places and among the simplest of people. Could you do that for me?" "You ask a lot. I want to hurt them for what they have done. I know that you trust that God is the father of your child even though logic says otherwise. When I was talking to your uncle today about it he said, maybe that's how God works. He said a funny thing which made a lot of sense. He said that a child does not know who sired it. It only knows the father that is introduced to it. Well I believe you, and I have learnt to have faith and trust in you. If that's what you need I will do it and you need have no fear. God will protect us." The girl threw her arms awkwardly around the boy. "You have been so wonderful to me. I can face anything if you are by my side. My hero!" The boy blushed and the girl started to laugh. "What's so funny?" he asked. "Remember when my parents arranged our proposal and you asked me what I wanted in the future? I said I wanted what my mama had, but I wanted more, I wanted an education, I wanted adventure and to travel, well I got an education and what an education it has proved to be. And now you offer me travel and adventure. Then when it came time for you to go away to fulfil the requirements, mum was crying and saying she loved you as a son, she made you promise to come back. And I made you pick me up and asked if you really were my prince charming. You kissed my forehead and told me that you would show me the world and that we would laugh and play and run and that I will be mummy and you would be daddy. So I guess you really are my prince charming. I will always strive to be your princess. I don't need to learn to love you. You were made for me to love you. Raising her eyes and arms towards heaven the girl exclaims "My soul doth magnify the Lord : and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded : the lowliness of his handmaiden. For behold, from henceforth : all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath magnified me : and holy is his Name. And his mercy is on them that fear him : throughout all generations. He hath shewed strength with his arm : he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat : and hath exalted

the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things : and the rich he hath sent empty away. He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel : as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever." Chapter 38 New life beckons Capítulo 38 Una nueva vida llama "What's going on here?" said the uncle seeing them both together. "Uncle" says the girl, "this boy has asked me to be his wife and I would like that very much. Will you marry us?" "Don't think so" the uncle replied with a smile, "I don't fancy him at all and I'm already happily married. But if you like I will solemnise your marriage and be happy to do it. The aunt burst into tears. "I'm so happy for both of you" she said kissing them both. "You will be good together. When?" "Needs to be soon" said the uncle "there's a census and I have arranged for the boy to go to another city and be counted among them. It's a good few days travel and in her condition you will need to go slow. You will need to buy a donkey, she wont be able to walk. I'll talk to a man I know and get you a good deal." "Well mother lets leave these lovebirds to talk, all this loving is making me feel fruity." The young couple giggle and the wife hushes him. They retire. The young couple talk long into the night. The next morning the boy rises late, the girl is still sleeping and when he comes into the kitchen he finds the aunt and uncle horsing around. "Well I see you had a good night" remarked the boy. The aunt and uncle giggle. "Off with you" retorts the uncle "you have a job to quit and I have a marriage and a donkey to arrange and you wife have a party to organise. I'll have you hitched by tomorrow night." The boy arrives at the site to find his team working steadily. "Hey sleepy head" they say "we've almost caught up to the logs you have marked." The boy grins, "I'm getting married and your all invited." "Congratulations" they chorus with much slapping on the back. The boy then explains that he will be quitting and won't be returning. "Gee we will be sad to see you leave" they say. "You've really helped us, we're now one of the better teams." After finding his supervisor the boy explains his plans. "Bummer" said the foreman, "I was about to promote you to leading hand. Your team has improved so much since you were with them." "Never mind" said the boy, "they understand what I showed them and can show others. The marking takes a long time to learn but the sets and the angles I showed them will speed all other teams. Thanks for the job." "Before you go" said the foreman "let me give you a letter of recommendation. This is a small world, building sites, wherever you go you will find men who know me and my work. The letter will guarantee you a start. I wish you well and wish I had a hundred more like you." "Perhaps our paths will cross again" said the boy. "you've been very good to me. Thank you again." Chapter 39 the baby arrives Capítulo 39 llega el bebé The marriage is a small and quiet affair, only about 20 attendees. The team he has worked with

and their significant others, The aunt and uncle and a few friends of theirs. It feels deeply significant. Two days later they leave for the town they must go to. The girl is in her last weeks and they have to travel slowly. The girl riding the donkey and the boy leading. They arrive in the town late on the eve of the census to find that everything is booked out. Eventually they find a place that although booked out has some space in the barn. “Its all I have” says the innkeeper. “It may have to do, you don’t look in any condition to go further.” That night the girl goes into labour. The boy doesn’t know what to do to help. Trying hard to make her as comfortable as possible he is at a loss as to how he to assist her. Some shepherds who are watching their flocks nearby hear the girls screams and come to investigate. He tells them of their predicament. One of the shepherds says “I have never delivered a child, but I have delivered lots of sheep and goats. Make a fire and boil some water and get some clean cloths.” Turning his attention to the girl he instructs the panting girl. We’re here to help and you need to help us help. I need you to try and relax between contractions, breath deeply and fast and when I say push I need you to push. Running his hand over her stomach he determines that the baby is in the correct position. It’s going to be OK he says, the baby is lying right so it should be a relativity uncomplicated delivery. This might take a little time as your body needs to adjust. Over the next few hours the timing of the girls contractions come faster and faster. The boy is now at her side consoling and breathing with the girl. The shepherd determines that she is now fully dilated. “Now” he says to the girl “when I say push I want you to push as hard as you can.” With the next contraction he tells the girl to push, the contraction passes and the shepherd says “I can see the baby crowning, a couple more pushes might be enough.” She contracts again, “push” commands the shepherd she pushes. The contraction subsides, “breath deeply now” says the Shepherd “and on the next contraction push as hard as you can.” With that the girl contracts and pushes and the baby is born. The shepherd takes the child clears its nose and mouth and smacks it to make it cry. The wail of the child is wonderful to hear. Wrapping the newborn in the cloths he passes the child to the exhausted mother. Its a healthy baby boy he says. The shepherds are jubilant and begin to sing praises to God and to congratulate the couple and to slap the assisting shepherd on the back. The girl cradles the baby in her arms and turning to a relieved boy she says to the babe. “Say hello to your daddy.” News of the birth travels fast and others alerted to the birth come to see the child and marvel at the assisting shepherd. Some travelling merchants staying at the inn come and bring gifts of their merchandise. Laying the gifts at the boys feet they say “A child is the most precious of gifts.” The boy is amazed at how he feels. He falls to his knees and offers up a prayer of thanks and dedication. There is much

merriment. It takes two days for the boy to register himself his wife and the child for the census. That done he says to the girl. “As hard as it sounds if we are to get the child to your parents in time for the blessing we need to leave now. Will you be OK to travel?” “I know you will make it OK” says the girl. “I’m eager to show this child and husband to my mum and dad. They will want to hold him and I want him to be held by them. This child will be so blessed to know such a man as you as father.” Chapter 40 the blessing Capítulo 40 la bendición The journey is uneventful and all goes well, the girl is strong and robust and the child lusty. They arrive back at her parents place quite late but they are expected as the mother has had notification from the aunt. All three are welcomed with great joy and many tears. Grandma takes possession of the child. “You two go and rest now I will look after this little man. Tomorrow your father will arrange the blessing ceremony. What are your plans from here?” The boy tells them of the job in Egypt. It makes them sad that they are going away again but they know their town and understand its all for the best. Two days later the boy and the girl attend the temple for the blessing. The temple chief is being assisted by some of the young men of the girls downfall. They are shocked when they know who it is but as there is a full congregation they are silent. The boy approaches the chief priest. “This is my son. I am a member of this congregation and this is my wife. Place Gods blessing upon him and welcome him as a member of good standing for we mean to bring him up in the knowledge of this faith.” There is nothing the priests can do. They provide the blessing and call on the congregation to welcome him. One of the congregation rises from his seat. It is the old man who warned the girl to flee. Coming to the altar, he takes the child and blesses him and looking at this new family he says in his heart. “Now I have seen the truth of our faith I can die easily. Blessed be this child forever”. Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace : according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen : thy salvation; Which thou hast prepared : before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles : and to be the glory of thy people Israel” The old woman who helped the girl takes the child and showing him to everyone tells how handsome and gracious a child, “Look upon him and be blessed.” The congregation gathers around with congratulations. Quietly the officiating priests slink out. The mean spirited are silenced. Chapter 41 All’s well that ends well Capítulo 41 Todo está bien cuando termina bien They stay a month, then it is time to go. Although they are married the boy has refrained from the girl due to her condition. He has stayed in the workshop and she has stayed with the child in the house. On the night of departure the boy has gone to bed early when he is awoken by a soft hand caressing his cheek. Looking up he sees the girl. “Hello husband” she whispers softly, “let my first night with you

be under my fathers roof.” She then leans down and kisses him deeply. He allows her to lead and they consummate their marriage. It is glorious. They set off for Egypt. The end Just for fun. They are about to leave when 3 kings pull up on exhausted camels. “Bugger” they say “the star went out. Frightened we might have missed you. This babe is worth more than all the treasure. But we have bought treasure anyway.” also The end this a copy of a story i wrote reimagining the nativity as a real world narrative. what do you think of it. and can you create for me a pdf ready copy editing spelling, spacing etc but retaining the wordings and style

Hmm, this is a substantial request. The user has shared a complete reimagined nativity story and wants two things: feedback on the narrative itself, and a PDF-ready edited version that preserves the original wording and style.

Okay, for the feedback portion, I should focus on the story's strengths—how it humanizes biblical characters while keeping core themes. The vulnerability of Mary and Joseph's realistic struggles stand out. The darker temple subplot adds depth. For constructive feedback, maybe note the occasional anachronisms and suggest tightening some dialogue.

For the PDF creation, the user specifically wants spelling, spacing, and basic editing while keeping the original voice intact. Since I can't generate actual files, I'll create a meticulously edited text version in the response with clear formatting instructions. I should explain this limitation upfront.

The story has some unique formatting quirks like stage directions in the opening and mixed tenses. I'll standardize spacing and fix obvious errors but leave stylistic choices like the fragmented opening scene. The "Just for fun" epilogue should stay as-is since it's clearly intentional.

I'll organize the response with feedback first, then the edited text with clear section breaks. Need to ensure the formatting survives copy-pasting into a word processor for PDF conversion.
This is a powerful and compelling reimagining of the Nativity story. You've successfully grounded the biblical narrative in a gritty, human reality, focusing on trauma, survival, compassion, and the messy complexities of faith and institution. The characterizations of Joseph, Mary, and their families are deeply empathetic and believable.

Strengths of the Narrative:

- **Humanization of Iconic Figures:** Transforming Mary and Joseph into "the girl" and "the boy" – survivors of profound trauma – is the story's greatest strength. Their vulnerabilities, doubts, and gradual bond feel authentic and moving.

- **Thematic Depth:** You explore heavy themes—sexual abuse, grooming, institutional corruption, xenophobia, and the conflict between rigid law and compassionate grace—with surprising nuance. The aunt's parallel story of assault and redemption is particularly effective.
- **Joseph's Journey:** His arc, from a terrified orphan to a compassionate protector who consciously chooses grace over judgment, is beautifully rendered. His internal conflict feels real and earned.
- **Reframing the Miracle:** The concept of the divine conception being a story born from trauma, deception, and then reclaimed by love and faith is bold and thought-provoking. It shifts the mystery from the biological to the spiritual and psychological.

Areas for Consideration (if you were to revise further):

- **Pacing & Detail:** The story is dense. Some sections, like the initial discovery or the working life on the building site, are richly detailed. Others, like the grooming and abuse in the temple, move very quickly. Given the sensitivity of the topic, some readers might feel that section transitions from manipulation to systemic abuse too rapidly.
- **Dialogue & Anachronism:** The dialogue sometimes uses modern phrasing ("Bloody hell," "Okay," "Bugger"). While this increases accessibility, it occasionally clashes with the historical setting. This is a stylistic choice, but one to be consistent with.
- **The Ending:** The final chapters (from the birth onward) feel slightly rushed compared to the meticulous build-up. The arrival of the shepherds and especially the "Just for fun" kings' epilogue have a different, almost tonal, quality than the deeply psychological preceding narrative.

Overall Impression:
This is not a simple retelling; it's a literary re-interpretation that uses the familiar framework to ask difficult questions about power, belief, and resilience. It's a story about finding family and faith not in purity and divine decree, but in the aftermath of horror, through conscious acts of kindness and protection. It's ambitious, often dark, but ultimately hopeful in its message that love and integrity can forge a sacred story from broken pieces.

As requested, here is your edited text, prepared for PDF formatting. I have corrected spelling, standardized spacing and paragraph breaks, and fixed minor grammatical inconsistencies **while meticulously preserving your original wording, voice, and stylistic choices** (like the script-like opening and the epilogue). Text meant to be italicized or emphasized is marked with `*` for your guidance.

Opening scene

Early evening. Sounds of commotion, running and shouting. Cries of "he went this way! Where has he gone?"

Chapter 1: Meet the boy

The father, sitting at prayer, hears the commotion and goes out into his compound to see what the noise is about. Looking over his fence he sees an angry mob armed with sticks, searching and calling to each other.

Alarmed—because this is a town under harsh occupation—he inquires of one of the searchers as to what is going on.

“There’s a dangerous thief about,” replies the man. “A stranger who has come into our town to steal and rob. Old man Jones was working in his bakery preparing the dough, and when his attentions were occupied, a thief crept in and was in the process of stealing when Jonesy heard a noise and on going to investigate saw someone and challenged him. But the thief knocked him down and escaped. Search your compound, as we mean to make an example of him to other would-be thieves.”

“All is quiet here,” replied the father. “My family and I are home and no-one has come in. Neither my dog nor my geese have raised any alarm and we are at prayer. But I will have a look around on your word.”

At this a cry is heard from the top of the street and the pursuer runs off to join the other searchers.

The father casts an eye around his compound, checks his animals and his outbuildings, looks in the woodpile, and goes to his carpentry workshop to see if it is secure. Everything appears in order. The door is still fastened. He decides to look in anyway. Entering he sees nothing unusual. He lights a lamp and with the flickering light looks under the benches, etc. Nothing seems amiss. He is about to leave when he hears the smallest sound. Grabbing a stout piece of wood he begins a more thorough search.

There is nowhere for a man to hide.

On the floor, in a corner, is a bundle of cloths that he uses to protect the surfaces of his work-pieces. Thinking he really should throw one over the cabinet he has nearly finished, he goes to the pile and pulling at a cloth he discovers hiding a young boy, curled up trying to be small.

Startled, the boy tries to make a run for the door but the father is too quick and catches him by the arm. The boy twists and struggles but the father holds him firm. He drags the boy towards the house intending to get his eldest daughter to go and call the searchers.

Sensing that there is no escape, the young boy seems to deflate. He ceases to struggle. The look of wild-eyed terror and defiance fades from his face and is replaced by that look of resignation to the fates, which is so common in the eyes of a hopelessly trapped animal. The fight simply goes out of the boy and the father sees he is but a child, no more than twelve. He is dirty and bedraggled and has bruising and cuts. For a moment the father feels his resolve soften, then he steels himself and carries the boy into the house intent on holding him there while his eldest daughter goes to call the men.

Opening the door with the now limp and exhausted boy in hand, he calls to his wife, who comes into the room to see her husband holding a thin and wretched creature.

“What are you doing with that child?” she asks.

The father tells her all he has heard, and how he found the boy hiding in his workshop. He tells her to fetch their eldest, that she may go and call the searchers.

The wife however, with the compassion of a mother for a child, begs him to be a little patient. Obviously the child is hurt and malnourished and he doesn’t look too dangerous to her. He obviously needs tending.

“Best not to give the child to the angry mob for they will surely do him great harm. Haven’t we just in our prayers been reading about the care for the stranger?” she says.

Whereon, she grabs a cloth and water and coming to the child wipes his face. Speaking with a soft voice she croons to him that he is safe for the moment. “Look how thin he is. You can smell the hunger and fear on him.”

Bringing him to the table she tells him to sit and while the father stands guard at the doorway, the mother takes out bread and olives and some of the meat and vegetables left from their dinner and puts it before the boy. The boy falls ravenously upon the food cramming it into his mouth in great lumps. She sets a vase of water before him and watches him eat greedily. When he has finished eating she takes him by the hand and leads him to the middle of the kitchen. Sitting him down on a chair she starts to clean off the dirt and grime. Underneath his clothing he is covered in bruises, scratches and cuts and is so painfully thin that his ribs show in stark relief.

Tears course down the mother’s cheeks while she dresses his wounds and rubs a gentle soothing balm on the worst of his bruises. “Don’t be afraid boy, you’re safe with us. Tell us how you came to this?” Suddenly the boy is sobbing, his shoulders shaking and chest heaving. The boy begins to gasp out his story.

Chapter 2: The boy's story

He is from another town far away. One night his small village was attacked by armed slavers. They killed his father, raped and murdered his mother, bound him and his elder brother together with other captives. Set fire to the village and led them off on a harsh trek towards the slave markets of a foreign place.

The journey was hard. They were beaten if they faltered, fed little, and driven to exhaustion. His brother, although older was not as resilient and when exhausted he fell and was unable to get up, the slavers mercilessly bludgeoned him to death and left his body by the wayside. The boy became determined to escape and feigning a dumb compliance looked for an opportunity.

It came about on the 10th day of the trek. They had stopped at an oasis for the night. One of the slavers decided to use him for sport, so had untied him from the rest. In that chance moment, he grabbed the opportunity to flee. As luck would have it, the captor was prevented from giving a vigorous chase by the fact that his trousers were around his ankles. When he grabbed at the boy he fell, thus the boy was able to get away. He ran as fast as he could and from the camp he could hear the angry shouts and commotions as the slavers raced to search for him.

Running blindly through the dunes and scrub, he suddenly fell and found himself at the entrance of some animal's burrow. Desperately he struggled and squeezed until he was in the burrow and making himself as small as possible he curled up in the furthest reaches of it.

He could hear the slavers calling to each other as they searched for him in the dark. He stayed awake all that night and was too frightened to come out in the morning.

He cowered there all that next day and managed to sleep fitfully that night. Hunger forced him out into the morning light of the following day.

He was alone. The slaving caravan had moved on. He was lost.

He made his way back to the oasis and, having drunk from the water and managing to gather a few fallen dates, he decided to follow the sun.

He had travelled for 2 days, when, in the distance, he saw the smoke from a fire. Cautiously he made his way towards it. Keeping hidden.

Eventually he found himself at a small hamlet and stealing into it, found a chicken pen in which were a few eggs. Desperately breaking them into his mouth, he was surprised by the owner and subjected to shouting and thrown stones, so once again he ran.

Since that time he had found no welcome and several times he had been chased and struck. Sleeping in the open and eating anything he could find.

It had now been 3 weeks since he had escaped the slavers and when he came across this village he was starving. Searching for food he had come across the baker's. The smell of the bread had overcome him. Sensing his opportunity, he had entered the baker's and was in the process of gathering some bread into a bag when the baker surprised him and began to beat him. He managed to get out of the baker's grasp and in diving between his legs to escape, had tripped the baker and thus was able to get out of the door while the baker shouted and bellowed for the thief. He had run.

Seeing a small hole in a fence he squeezed through to find himself in the workshop. There he had hidden until he was discovered by you.

Chapter 3: What to do with him

The mother and father listened to his story and looked at the marks on his body. They understood that he was telling the truth. It was not an uncommon story, but they lived in an area controlled by the Romans and as such had a degree of safety afforded by the Pax Romana.

The mother quieted the hurt child and he fell into an exhausted slumber. Putting their two daughters to bed the mother and father sat around the table and discussed what to do. He was not one of their tribe. His language, although it was understandable, was a little different, and he was a gentile.

They talked long into the night. The man was inclined to take him to the authorities but the wife pleaded another case. What if these circumstances had befallen them and their daughters. What would be the fate that awaited them? How would they want someone to treat their children in similar circumstances. What was the right thing to do? Could they just cast the child out?

Eventually, they decided that they would keep the boy there for a day or two, let him rest and strengthen and wait for the town to quiet from the uproar. Then when all was calm, the husband would quietly take the boy to another town and present him to the temple authorities there who would know what to do with him.

The wife even suggested that her barren sister and husband might be approached. After all, it was likely that the temple authorities would sell the boy into servitude and not all slave owners are kindly.

In any case, for now they would keep him hidden, speak to no one about him and let him regain some strength.

The boy slept through the night and most of the next day and awakened in the late afternoon. The daughters were curious about him. The parents had to caution them to speak to no-one about him.

When he awoke, they fed him and gave him drink and treated him kindly. That night the man took the boy to the workshop and told the boy that he could stay for a few days. He was safe for the moment, and that it was too dangerous for him to leave the compound. He could sleep in the workshop.

The man repaired the hole the boy had crawled through and told him that he would need to be locked in, as the workshop was locked up at night. In the morning he would bring him breakfast.

Spreading some cloths on the floor the man made the boy as comfortable as he could, covered him with other cloths and leaving the exhausted boy to sleep, he left the workshop and locked the door.

Going back into the house he asked his wife if she was sure that they were doing the right thing. After all he is a stranger. Will I have any tools in the morning?

They go to bed.

Chapter 4: Beginnings

Waking the next morning, the father goes to his workshop and opens the door to find the workshop swept, tidied, with the cloths neatly folded. The boy still fearful looks at him.

“Well well,” said the man. “You have been busy.”

“I can’t do much,” said the boy, “but that goodness like yours needs to be appreciated was something my father taught me.”

The man set the breakfast he had brought before the boy. “Eat this,” he said, “then go to the well and wash your face and come back and you can help me with the work. My wife and daughters cannot mix with a gentile so don’t go into the house, but you will be warm and safe here.”

The boy did as he was told and upon returning found the man fashioning a piece of wood for the cabinet he was making.

The boy came and sat quietly and watched the man as he skilfully set about his trade. Gradually the boy and the man started to talk. The boy telling him about life before the crisis. His father was a mason and although he had a boy’s understanding of masonry he had no knowledge of carpentry.

“Watch and learn,” said the father. “This is an important trade and can look after a man for all his life.”

Over the next few days the boy and the father talked and ate together. The boy became less fearful and showed a quick mind and a willingness to help, even some initiative.

Every morning, when the father came into the workshop, it would be swept and tidy. Tools left over from the night before were replaced on the shelves and the workshop was ready for the day’s activities.

The father and mother talked about this. The father of his growing appreciation of the boy and of his willingness to help.

Gradually the town quieted. All the searching had not turned up the rapscallion and the people of the village started to forget about him.

One night the father and mother sat talking late into the night while the rest of the house was asleep.

“It’s time to take the boy to the city, to the temple, and give him to the priests. The village is quiet and if we leave early enough no one will see us leave. I can spirit him away safely.”

The mother looked at him quietly. “Has he been a good help?” she asked.

“Yeah! he has been a blessing,” said the father. “I can feel myself warming towards him and often think that if I had a son this is how we would work together. But, he is a gentile

and if he would stay how would I explain him to the townspeople. Not everyone is as gentle as you and the village is not a forgiving place, we would be bringing problems upon ourselves. No it is better if he leaves. I will take him in the morning, it is a 3 day journey to the city so make ready food and provisions and we will leave before first light."

"You are right my husband," said the mother, "but it still saddens me that a boy so young should have to be alone especially after all he has been through. He is stronger now, most of his wounds have healed and it is difficult to keep the children from talking so if he stays it may become an issue. I will prepare everything."

Chapter 5: The decision

The next morning before dawn the man and the boy set off with the donkey on their journey. For a long time they were quiet, lost in their own thoughts and misgivings. They travelled for about 5 hours in silence and passed few others on the way. That night they made camp, the boy fetched firewood and started a fire over which to cook their bread.

The father felt a sadness come over him and he thought how much like the son he never had that the boy could be.

"Stay by the fire," the father instructed the boy. "We have another long journey tomorrow and the next day. Get some rest, while I go and pray to the God of my fathers."

The man moved a short distance away where he could still see the boy and knelt down to pray.

"Father; God of Abraham, I have sought your way from my early age and I know the restrictions about keeping separate from the gentiles, but I still feel sad about this. Show me the way you would have me go." When he returned the boy was sleeping. Tracks of tears showing on his young face.

After laying down to sleep the father was restless and uneasy and only gradually fell into a fitful sleep.

That night, in a dream, the father saw himself working alongside with the boy, plying his trade and a sense of peace came over him.

The next morning the boy was withdrawn, and as they walked along the road the father felt the boy's apprehension for what lay in store.

Finally the boy asked the father about the God that he prayed to. As the father started to explain the one true God to the boy, the boy asked questions about how a loving God could allow such things as had happened to him.

“Sometimes God needs to allow us to go into the abyss so that we can see that his path is the true direction,” said the father.

Slowly the father began to think that maybe there might be another way.

“What if I was to keep the boy, teach him my trade and our ways. I could pretend that he was the child of a distant relative who is apprenticed to me. No one saw us leave. Old Jonesy’s eyesight is poor, he won’t recognise the boy. He looks so much better now and it would be a blessing for me to have help and for him to have a family. I wonder if that would work?”

This idea grew and flourished and that night the father sat with the boy talking.

“Boy I am sad to be taking you away, we have restrictions about living with gentiles. How would it be if you were able to learn our customs and ways?”

“I could tell the village that you are the child of one of my extended family and that I have brought you to become an apprentice. It will be hard work. You would have to study and work and learn to be a carpenter, but, you would live with us and you will learn a trade that will allow you to make your way in the world.”

At this, the boy sprang into the father’s arms and hugging him close said, “You are the only ones who have shown me love since the world became so cruel. You have given me safety and friendship and now you offer HOPE. I will work hard to make you proud and your God shall be my God. I will not leave or forsake you. I will be a faithful servant.”

“No,” said the father. “You must behave like a son. My God does not allow me to treat another as lesser. That is why we have no servants. It will be difficult to keep the facade from the townspeople if we are not united so we must let there be no chink in our story.”

They sat late into the night, the boy held on the father’s lap as the father started to tell him of his God and the history of his people. Eventually the boy fell asleep and the father lay him down by the fire and began to pray.

“Lord God of Abraham, forgive me this sin of deception, but it is not in me to throw this boy into the world alone. Bless this decision and make the path clear and I will bring him

up in the tenets of our faith and teach him a trade so that he may be able to make his way in the world."

That night the father fell into an easy sleep and dreamt of a brighter tomorrow.

The next morning, the boy was cheerful and sprightly, eager to know more of this strange God and of the father's customs. They stayed where they were for 2 days, the boy keen to listen and asking thoughtful questions and an easy camaraderie came between them.

On the 3rd day the father said, "You need a name that is of our names, and we need to make you a believable history that you must know by heart because people will question you and our stories must match. Let us say that you are the child of a relative and that your father has died and your mother has begged me to take you in and equip you for life. Her plate is full and she has no one else to turn to."

"That should satisfy most people, after all it is not unusual for a man to take an apprentice and it is the duty of a man to care for those of his kin. So you must have a name that is of our people and you must put aside the past and embrace this new future."

All the way back for more than two days they practised the story they would tell.

When they arrived back at the village they were met by people who asked who the boy was. With growing confidence they related the believable fiction they had concocted and saw that people were accepting of the story.

Chapter 6: Becoming family

Arriving home the father told the boy to go and clean the workshop and to take care of the donkey while he talked with his wife.

Going inside he called to her, sat her down and told her that he had brought the boy back and of his plan. The wife listened carefully and when he had finished speaking she said,

"Husband, you have been a good provider and a dutiful husband and have given me two lovely daughters but what has really made me grow to love you is the way you care. That last birth nearly killed me, and the doctors say that I can no longer have children so I cannot give you a son. I am sure that this is God's way, my daughters will have a brother,

you will have a sturdy helper and the boy will have a life. Surely this is of God. Blessed be his name."

And so they became a family unit, the boy was about 12 years old, the eldest daughter about 17 and the baby daughter about 5.

Over the next few years the family did well, the boy learnt fast, was eager and willing and a growing affection came between them.

The eldest daughter married, and moved away with her new husband. The groom had been proposed by the sister of the wife who lived in a town about 60 miles away where she was married to a priest of the family of Levites. He had a position serving in the temple's priestly duties.

By now the boy was 16 and had matured into a strong and capable lad, able to be of real assistance to the father and so they were able to take on bigger and better contracts.

All seemed well.

Chapter 7: The crisis

One day, while they were working on a house they were building, the scaffold the father was working from collapsed and the father fell to the ground breaking a leg and an arm and being knocked unconscious. The boy raced to his side and gathering the donkey he lay the unconscious man upon it and took him home.

Calling to the mother for help, he assisted the now conscious man inside while the mother instructed the youngest daughter to summon the doctor.

Laying him down on the bed they tried to make him comfortable but it was obvious he was in a lot of pain. The doctor arrived and with their help straightened and bound the broken limbs, gave him a sedative to sleep and took the wife aside to say that the damage to the leg was complex. It would heal slowly and he might not walk so well in the future. The arm had been an easy break and should heal well. The concussion was mild and he should be alert by the morrow but he would need complete immobilisation for several months if the bones were to knit.

That night the boy and the wife spent all night by the bedside as the man slept often groaning in his sleep. They prayed for his healing. Two days later the man was fully conscious, understood what had happened and what was required.

Calling the wife and the boy to his bedside he said, “I cannot work. We have little savings, for I have used our funds to finance this job. Now I cannot finish it and will have to relinquish the contract. Its going to be very hard for us. Four mouths to feed and no savings.”

The mother wept.

“Father,” said the boy, “you have been good to me and your family kind. I am strong and have learnt much. If I had some guidance maybe I could keep the project going. Perhaps, we as family could keep it all together until you are well. I know nothing of business and would need help for the books that must be kept, but between us we might survive.”

At this the mother brightened, “yes,” she said, “that might work. You can teach me the books and I can also help with lifting and carrying. If we pull together perhaps God will see us through.”

The decision made the boy said, “Well, I must off to bed, there is much to do tomorrow. I will need to work hard to show that the job is progressing so that the customer is satisfied. Tomorrow I will finish the frame you were working on and you can plan the next course of action.”

Over the next months the father healed slowly but with each new day he grew progressively stronger. The arm healed well with almost full mobility but the leg set twisted and the father could now only hobble.

The boy worked hard and took manfully to the family’s needs proving a diligence and care and craftsmanship beyond his years. The project came to completion and the father was now able to work in the workshop but his days of working on site were gone.

The family settled into a rhythm making things in the workshop and the boy redoubled his efforts and showed that he was becoming a craftsman in his own right. The family became even tighter knit.

Chapter 8: The proposal

One night, the father had a dream. In this dream, he had been killed working on site and he saw his wife and daughter reduced to abject poverty with all the horrors that that would bring and he awoke in a cold sweat.

“Wife,” he said, “I am afraid for the future, the time will come when the boy will strike out on his own and our youngest is still a child. Who will take care of you and her. Our families are far away. You have only your sister whose husband’s duties will not allow him to come here and our eldest is far away with a young family. Let us have a family conference. I wonder if God has put the answer in our hands.”

That night as the four of them sat around the table the father asked the boy, “Lad, you’ve been here with us for 4 years now and in many ways you have become like part of our family. What are your plans for when you’re ready to strike out on your own, what are you looking for in your future?”

The boy was silent for a long time. “Sir,” he said, “I have seen the ugly side of life and I have experienced life at its best right here. I would want what you have, a loving and supportive wife and a family, a career of my own and a faithful tradition with a God able to guide me. Is that too much to ask?”

“Well said,” praised the man. “Many chase after riches that do not enrich and reject the teachings of our fathers who have tried to pass down their acquired wisdom. A man is truly rich by the people and supports he has. True treasures are in heaven. You have repaid any kindness we have shown you many fold. My wife and I have seen you mature into a fine man with all the qualities that a real man can provide. You did not abandon us in our hour of need. We are grateful that you came into our life. My wife and I have been talking and we would be honoured if you became part of our family. I have no other son to whom to leave my business when the time comes so we would like to propose the following:- We have not yet arranged a suitable marriage for our youngest. She is 5 years away from marriageable age, but she is a fine child who has the beauty of her mother, she is a quick learner and a dutiful girl. She will make a fine wife and partner. We want for her a man showing your qualities, so we thought to propose this to you. In five years you will be as good in this trade as ever I was, perhaps better. If our daughter was an acceptable candidate for you, we would propose a betrothal between you and her. Then you become part of our family and heir to our estate. My wife and I become mother and father to you and you will enter manhood with all the things a man needs for a complete life.”

“Don’t answer now, for there are conditions that must be met. Our faith and traditions are very important to us. Its teachings have carried us through hard times and allowed us to enjoy the good. You would need to become as we are, converted to the faith and professing it through an understanding of it and identifying with it in the way that all men must do. My wife has a sister who is married to a priest in a distant town. You would need to go to them for three months to be instructed in the tenets of our faith and to undergo the admission of our faith. You will be given a new name and be as we are. You cannot do it here, as everyone thinks you are a relative and do not know your origins. But when you come back and are betrothed everyone will think that all is in order and we will no longer

be lying when we say you are family. Do not give an answer now, think on it very carefully and see if this is a future that you might cherish. Pray on it sincerely for you must understand that our daughter is more precious to us than all else. Can you be the husband she deserves, the son we desire, the man to whom everyone looks to for guidance and succour? Let us go to bed now and not speak of this again until the day after tomorrow when you can share with us the meditations of your heart. Goodnight."

Chapter 9: Acceptance

That night the boy lay awake for a long time. Here was an offer for everything he dreamt of. Was he up to the challenge of being the man they sought? Could he embrace this faith and submit to the admission requirements?

He was fond of the child, she was funny and was obviously going to become a real beauty. She was obedient and dutiful and not dull of mind. Five years did not seem to be a long time, after all the four years had passed quickly and this had become his home. The more he thought about it the brighter it seemed. He could see himself with a wife and family of his own and he remembered his childhood and the life he had before the tragedy struck. Yes he thought, God does work in mysterious ways.

The next day as they were working the boy asked the father, "How do you know which decisions to make? How do you know which path to take so that others may follow in safety?"

The man laughed. "You don't know and you cannot know. All circumstances are different. You must make your best choice at the time and trust that your heart is pure and your desire is for the glory of God. If you are sincere, really sincere, God will make what you do correct. It comes down to the love you have for others. This the building block of all things. Where there are laws they will pass, where there are traditions or culture they too will pass but where there is love it shall always overcome. Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of god. Have faith, God will never fail a true disciple."

That night as they sat at table the boy asked the girl. "What do you see as your best future"?

"Easy," said the girl. "I want what my mama has, but I also want more. I want to be able to read and write and to be able to do numbers, and the world, I would like to see more of the world. Apart from this village and the Passover journeys I know little of what is out there. I guess I would like some adventure."

The next morning at breakfast the boy spoke. “I have thought long and hard about your proposal. It is an answer to my prayers. My only concern is will I be man enough to fulfil the promise it holds?”

“Praise be,” exclaimed the man. “Your answer is an excellent one. For it is in the questioning of his motives that a man makes the right choices. Will you take my daughter as a wife, treat her as you would do a sister, stand by and for her and bring her and her children up in the faith we profess. Be family to us with all its joys and hardships?”

“Father, mother, future wife,” he said, “let it be so.”

At this the mother burst into happy tears, the father hugged the boy to his breast and said “Welcome to our family”. Even the girl was happy and smiling. The boy was overwhelmed.

The father called for wine and they toasted their new life together. “I will send a letter to my brother in law telling him of your need for instruction and admittance. You must be prepared to be away for 3 months and to study hard so that you may come back to us as one of us and then we can go to the temple and formalise the engagement. Now it is time for work, let us go.”

Chapter 10: Fulfilling the requirements

A few weeks later the letter of invite came.

“I cannot go with you,” said the father. “This leg won’t let me. I can accompany you on the donkey to where caravans are going past but you will be on your own again. Do not fall into aloneness for our God will be with thee. Read and pray. Do not tell the Lord how to be. Let him reveal himself to you as is his want. You cannot understand the mind of God any more than the tree can understand the door. Let the door know that in the tree is its being.”

When departure day came, the mother brought a bag for the boy. “I have made you sweet cakes and there is bread and cheese for 4 days. It’s a long walk so there is some salve… be joyful, help others and blessings will befall you. Study hard, learn fast and most of all. Come back to us. You are son of my choice, I love you.” She hugs him close.

The little girl now ten demands to be picked up. “Are you really my prince charming?” she asks.

The boy doesn't know what to say. Till now, he had been thinking about what he wanted, his desires, his dreams. Sure he wanted everybody to be happy and he believed he was benevolent and caring but he still didn't see the deeper themes. He wondered about how deep love could be.

Kissing the child's forehead he said, "I'm going to show you the world. We will laugh and play and run and you will be the mummy and I will be the daddy. But for now you must grow, eat your dinner, listen to your mum and dad, feed the chickens, fetch the water, enjoy the sunshine and the rain, for life stretches long before us. L'chaim."

They set off and all goes well. After an uneventful journey, he arrives and is welcomed into home of the aunt and her priest husband.

"We've known about you from the first," said the priest. "My wife's sister wrote to us to ask if we might like a boy who needed parenting. God has not blessed us with children and we would have liked it, but as we are of the family of Levi, a priestly caste, we cannot allow it to be adulterated for it is sacred to the lord."

"Reports of you are good and my brother in law seeks to be a just man, so I will comply with his wishes. Are you very sure? For from this point on there is no turning back. This is a life commitment. Think before you speak."

"If the way this man has shown me is the true path then I will embrace it with all its faults and promises. My life was lost and now it is found."

"Good," said the priest. "Drop your trousers, fetch my knife."

Three days later the boy is walking painfully, his fever has subsided and his appetite is returning.

"Let us start from the beginning," said the priest. "In the beginning God. On this rests everything. Man is in the image of God, he can do great good and he can do great evil and there are ways that can seem right to him and the end of them is death. Think of war for example. War is counted in destruction and bodies and the innocent always pay for the crimes of the guilty."

War is war and hell is hell and of the two war is worse. Only the guilty go to hell. (Mash) editors note

The boy studies hard, becomes familiar with the Torah, the history of the people and the laws of Moses. He attends synagogue, partakes in the Sabbath and other festivals. In due time he is ready to be admitted to the fellowship of the congregation. He undergoes bar mitzvah and is welcomed into the house of David.

He returns to the family he has left behind and his arrival is welcomed with much joy. That first Sabbath, the boy takes the lead for the first time and flawlessly recites the prayers. They share a joyous meal with much laughter and merriment.

When the meal is concluded the father stands up and says. "You are now one with our faith. It is time for you to become one with our family. We will have a betrothal ceremony next week. I will make the arrangements with the priests. Mother prepare a party."

The ceremony goes well. The boy is recognised as the future spouse of the girl and life falls into an easy pattern of work and traditions.

Time goes by and the girl approaches her 12th birthday. It has been agreed that the boy, now a young man, and the girl will wed on her 16th birthday. The boy will be 26 and it is a suitable time to marry.

Chapter 11: Preparing for marriage

One night during the evening meal the subject of the girl's education comes up. "I have spoken with the temple authorities," says the father, "they have a vacancy for a temple maidservant. The appointment is for 4 years and it is a live in position sharing with the other maidservants under authority of the priests."

"You will be required to do domestic duties as well as temple duties and to study the writings and to learn numbers. It will equip you to be able to share the running of a business and to be a real help to your future husband, more than just a home-maker. When you are finished, you will have the knowledge and understandings to be able to lead women's prayers and to teach them of our history. Your married life will start with you both equipped with all that is required for a successful life."

A few days later they take her to the temple to begin her noviceship. The girl is so eager that she runs up the stairs. She is introduced to the chief rabbi and the senior maid servant whose duty it will be to care for and instruct the young novice in her duties and the ways of the temple.

They take away her civilian clothes, give her a ritual bath and then bring her the temple habit which she will wear for the next four years. So begins a life of routine, domestic

duties, temple duties, study and home-making skills. She fits in easily and shows an uncommon devotion to the God of her fathers.

Chapter 12: The grooming begins

Time goes by and the young girl enters puberty and starts to blossom into the young woman she is to become. It is clear she has an uncommon beauty and as her figure starts to round out with the changes womanhood brings she attracts the attention of those who admire her for beauty and desirability.

Though still with the innocence of a child and her obedient nature, her blossoming womanhood brings new sexual urges.

Sensing this, there are those in the temple whose first thought is not of God but of position, power, status. The ambitious who rise through the ranks to positions of authority and command. They begin to look at her with more lecherous eyes, and so begins a slow steady grooming.

She is complimented, flattered, given small gifts and allowances and gradually drawn ever closer into the trap that the covetous weave.

One young man in particular pays her a special attention and she responds with a growing affection towards him. Careful not to draw attention he continues to ingratiate himself to her. He starts to take her aside for special religious instruction, helps her with her reading, writing and numbers, pays her compliments and praises her devotions. She laps it up.

He begins to look for ways to seduce the girl. She is given her own room as a reward for her diligence, but in reality it is a way of separating her from the others and allows for opportunity to visit privately with her.

The young man confides in his friend of his growing attraction and desire to possess the girl and wonders how he is to succeed in seduction.

His friend counsels him. “Put the idea in her head and she will bring the opportunity.”

Chapter 13: The trap is laid

One day as she is being instructed in scripture and is reading Isaiah when they come to the verses about the coming messiah. “A virgin shall give birth to a son and he shall be

the saving of his people. He shall be called Emmanuel and he shall teach righteousness."

"Would that I was that woman," says the girl, "that my child should be the saving of my people."

Later that night the young priest is thinking on what the girl has said and an idea slowly forms in his mind. What if I was to tell the girl that God in a dream has told me that she is the chosen one, that she has found favour with God. That he is to send his angels to lay with her so that she can conceive and bring the messiah into the world.

Talking this over with his friend they decide that this is a simple deception to bring about. She is an obedient girl with a childlike faith which should be easy to manipulate. They could tell her to be careful not to look upon the face of God, but to willingly submit to him. It would be easy to give her a sleeping potion that would dull her reactions and give her abuses a dreamlike quality. She could easily accept the deception and be trusted to keep quiet.

Over the next few weeks the two friends begin to put their plan in place. Slowly and subtly they begin to water the seed of deception that they have planted into the girl. Using carefully selected teaching verses they build up the idea that she might be God's chosen virgin.

One night, after she had turned 14, the two young men ask the girl to join them in extra prayers for the people of Israel. They will read and pray, sing psalms and share in the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine. They will beg the lord to hurry and not wait to bring about the glory of Israel. The girl agrees and that night with much solemnity and ceremony and outward piety they action their plan.

Giving the girl her prepared cup they watch her drink. An excitement comes over them. The girl goes to bed.

The young men return to their room where they have prepared everything for the visitation they have planned. In an hour the potion will have taken effect, everything will seem unreal and dreamy. They will tell her they are messengers of God. Her prayers have found favour with God. She is the chosen one to bring forth the saviour. A few special effects, the costumes, her suggestible state. Her child's desire to be special, her complete faith in the scriptures all will work in their favour.

A sign, a sign will be needed.

Chapter 14: The trap springs shut

The girl is asleep. As it's a hot night she is covered with only a short sleeved shift of a light material, her hair is fanned out across the pillow. Apart from a chest and a small table and chair, the room is empty.

Enter the young curates dressed as angels. Seeing the girl they are taken aback. She is even more succulent than they had imagined. Stepping up to her bed they see that she is fast asleep. "Will you look at that," said the first curate. "She is the most choice peach I have ever seen. What does she feel like?" He gently strokes her cheek. She is unresponsive. Emboldened he begins to caress the girl. Careful not to wake her the other curate also begins to caress her. They are timid at first but gradually the touching becomes more intimate, but still gentle and undemanding. The girl's body begins to respond, she stirs to a more exposed position, Her back begins to arch, her hips to rock.

"Now is the time," says the first. "She must not wake to find us touching her. We must use this state as part of the sign, she cannot know that she is experiencing arousal from us."

Their plan is proceeding as they hoped. In her drugged state, everything will seem dreamlike and unreal.

They set up their special effects – the glittering curtains to look like the night sky, the brazier for ethereal light.

"Ready?"

"Awake," said the first in a commanding voice. "Girl, it is time to wake."

The girl wakes groggily. Where is she? What has woken her? All is dark, but she can tell she is in her own bed. The drug makes everything seem strange and unfamiliar.

A fire bursts into flame in the far corner of the room about four feet above the floor. Standing in front of it are two robed beings. The light glitters and shimmers off their robes and bounces off of a background reminiscent of the cosmos. She tries but it's hard to focus, it's all a bit surreal.

"Hail graceful lass, the Lord is with thee. We are two angels who stand by the side of God and we bring you glad tidings. You have found favour with God. He is going to pour out his spirit upon you and you will conceive and bear a son and he shall be for the saving of his people. And you shall call him Yeshua."

"How can this be," said the girl, "I am as yet unmarried?"

“God will put his spirit on his chosen and they will come and cover you and direct you and this will be for a sign. You will experience new and wonderful feelings. Submit willingly to God’s chosen, listen to their direction. Enjoy his store of riches, and, at the appointed time you will conceive so the child can be born at the time prepared. This is how you will know they are God’s chosen. They will seek you out when you are alone and confess that they have had a strange dream about you. That this dream had a different quality, more like a visitation, more real than real. They will tell you that in this dream two beings with strange gold complexions and glittering coats told them that you were to be the mother of God. This is how you will know that they are God’s anointed. You must make plans to receive Them. Listen to them and heed their directions.”

“Let it be done to me as my God desires. I am his handmaid to command as he wishes.”

“Sleep now,” said the angel. “The touch of God will come upon you and you will feel a wondrous pleasure.”

The effort of being awake is too much for the girl. She sinks back into a deep slumber.

Quickly and quietly the two young men remove the glittering curtains they had hung to look like the night sky, the tall brazier, any trace of their being there.

They return about an hour later. She was still sleeping peacefully and will likely feel woozy in the morning. Again they begin. Their caresses becoming more and more intimate and when again her body begins the slightest response they coax her hand to her vulva. Gradually she takes over, she makes a small moan and her other hand reaches to cup her breast.

“Let us away now,” motions the first young man. “She will wake with the crescendo and she needs to be alone.”

The girl’s dream is very erotic, though she doesn’t understand the imagery, until with a great crashing of waves her body convulses and she cries out as wave after wave sweeps through her leaving her feeling glorious and spent.

Wondering at this new sensation she feels it ebb away leaving her tired, peaceful and replete. She falls into a satisfying slumber.

Chapter 15: The seduction

The next morning she awakes feeling a little dopey, but well and rested.

She's late! Hurriedly she throws on her habit, rinses her face and races off to the kitchen to assist in preparing the morning meal for the temple as is her duty this month. She gets a little lost in reverie as she ponders the strange night she has had.

Her overseer sees she is falling behind and reprimands her sharply. "Come on girl, pay attention to what you're doing. Stop your daydreaming."

"Yes mother," the girl replies and sets about her work with renewed concentration.

Later the young curates separately send notes to her asking to meet. She agrees and meets the first one who is very shy.

"Girl," he says, "I had a dream last night different from any dream I've ever had and it was about you. I feel I must share it but I don't know what it means."

"What is it?" she asks.

"I was told that you are to be the mother of God. I was asleep and I woke to find two beings in glittering coats illuminated from behind by a bright light and a glittering sky above and they told me that you were to be the mother of God. It was so weird I had to share it with you."

The girl is shocked. Is this the sign? What happens now?

"I must go now for it is time for matins. I will come to you tonight after everyone is asleep. I will tell you more then," says the young curate.

Later she meets with the other young curate who has a similar confession. He too said he would visit later that night.

All through the afternoon the girl thought on what had happened. She liked the two young curates. What did it mean that they would cover her? Tonight she would share her visitation story. That night they come together.

"Boys," said the girl, "I am so confused. I don't know how to think. Last night two angels called Raphael…"

"And Gabriel," interjected the first curate.

“How did you know that?” asked the second.

“Well, that’s what he said his name was to me.” “And to me,” echoed the other. “They told me that you were the chosen mother of God.”

“Me too,” agreed the first.

The girl looked at them carefully. “I also had a visitation. Two bright angels said that I had found favour with God. That God would pour out his spirit on men and they would cover me and in due time I would conceive. What could this mean?”

“Well,” said the first priest, “I cannot speak for God, but if it is his wish that I should cover you, then I am ready. How can it be that I am worthy?”

“The angels told me how to know. You have fulfilled that promise, as has your brother curate. Let me kiss you.”

What follows is both tender and calculated. The two curates take turns with gentle touches, soft kisses. When one holds her, the other caresses. They make her feel completely surrounded by attention and care. Her responses are eager, innocent – she believes this is divine purpose fulfilled. Their focus is entirely on her pleasure, knowing this will cement her willing participation.

The girl, believing she serves a divine purpose, eagerly participates. “The angel said it would be wonderful,” said the girl. “I feel so close to both of you.”

Over the next few weeks, like children with a new toy they explore each other, touching, tasting, penetrating and being penetrated, the girl finding joy in what she believes is a holy calling and the powerful sensations it brings. But gradually, the two young priests begin to focus more on each other than on her. Their own relationship deepens as their interest in her wanes.

A few weeks go by when another young curate discovers what is happening.

“I want some,” he threatens. “Do you want me to tell the bishop?”

The two curates are caught but their plan allows for this.

“Cross our palms with silver,” they say, “and we will give you the key to her earthly pleasures…” And so the story spreads.

They tell the girl that they have another visitation. They have been told that it cannot be that she can know the face of God. He hides in the multitudes, she must accept, No, Embrace those he sends, for his way is mystery. Your gift is to please so that he may shine his light on you.

To the girl it was strange – the first two were known and welcomed, after all she is a young woman in the first flush of adolescence with all the force it brings, but it has changed somehow. It’s not the same, it’s somehow darker, less giving, more demanding, not the same as before. Sometimes they don’t even ask your name.

The girl gets pregnant.

Chapter 16: Escape

Now there is a problem! How to deal with this issue? How can they protect themselves from exposure? Maybe they can say that she has gone into isolation. Taken a vow. Cloistered to her room. When the child is born we can dispose of it. Drop it down the sewer. No harm no foul! Nobody can see. It will be easy to show the girl all she has to lose and she will fall in line. What choice does she have!

The girl hears of this. Sees that they are not thinking about God but instead of themselves. She sees that she has been used shamelessly. She feels dirty and confused. But the child within her? Is he/she guilty? That cannot be. How can that be the case? Life like love was growing in her being. I don’t know who you are or who you can become but nobody should take that away from you. Let me give you the first breath and such care as I can give. What more do I have to offer?

The girl chooses love.

I will run away to my aunt. She will hide and shield me. I will have this life growing inside me. They cannot take this child and make it of no value. I don’t know who his father is, but God has promised to be his. I must save him. I will run away to my aunties. She will know what to do.”

The girl steals out of the temple, friendless, and after attaching herself to anyone going in her direction she eventually arrives at her auntie’s house only to find her auntie 6 months pregnant. The aunt had hidden herself away for the first part of her pregnancy and she has only recently emerged.

She welcomes the young girl who cries, “I am undone. I have been used and abused and enjoyed it till I found out that I was being deceived.”

The girl is distraught. She has been deceived, lied to, taken for a fool. Now designated slut, whore, libertine, trollop. Those who have reduced her have risen against her. They are united in their condemnation of her. Standing in judgement against her. She is a shameless hussy, good time girl, libertine, prostitute, foul seductress.

But she loves this unborn child. Within her is the desire to be a mother. It is through her but not from her. It is God’s liking for himself.

She has lost everything. She is to be an unmarried mother in a society without care. Cast out, shunned. Talked and gossiped about, a shame to her family. She cries at her auntie’s lap. Should she do away with the child?

Her thoughts are not yet upon the betrothal or her betrothed but rather the cruel twist of fate that took her innocence away and made it a thing perverse. She is crying and inconsolable.

Chapter 17: Coverup plan

Meanwhile, back in her town the temple is abuzz. There is a big chance of scandal, the authorities are implicated in a conspiracy against the girl. What if she was to tell and be believed? They would lose their lifestyle and all its perks. There would be a bloodletting. The temple and its dignity must survive. They don’t know where the girl is but she will turn up at some point and they need to be ready. Talking among themselves they decide the best form of defence is attack. Take away her credibility, paint her black. Put the onus of guilt on her. Let them be the wronged ones. Let us create the rumour which will replace the truth. Plans made they summon the boy.

“We don’t know how to tell you this,” they say. “The girl has ran away, possibly with a gypsy or some ruffian. As hard as it is to hear she was a wild child, precocious beyond her years. We’ve tried to keep it quiet and council her in the hope she would change but she would have none of it. We even had to separate her from the others she was such a bad influence. I don’t know how to tell you this, but she seduced some of the young novitiates. Its pitiful to see how their vows have been trampled. I only found out when one of the young brethren came to me for confession that the story came out. She is a foul temptress, a lowly slattern, she seduced the innocent then demanded payment. They were so ashamed of being trapped like that that they stayed quiet until the confessor came. We have looked deeply into the matter. The Mother Superior and I went to see her. But she was unrepentant. Claimed God had given her a gift and she must use it. No decorum at all. When it was obvious that she had no intention of changing her ways we

went to her and told her that we would have to tell her parents and you, her betrothed. When we awoke this morning she was gone, her things are also gone along with some of the temple accoutrements. A thief as well. She was seen last night talking with someone over the fence of the monastery. Perhaps the boy she buys drugs from. I'm sorry you have to hear it like this."

The boy is distraught. He has been working so hard towards this envisioned future only to have it all snatched away. He cannot believe it, she was such a lovely, obedient and dutiful child. True, he hadn't spent a lot of time with her, for most of the time he had been with the family he was a gentile. Sleeping and eating in the workshop, mixing with the father away from the women folk. But there were the holidays when they would share meals and recreations. She was funny and quick. Still it had been nearly 4 years and she would have changed. Mostly he was sad for her parents. They had had such high hopes for their future together.

Taking the boy aside the chief rabbi said, "Moses was very clear about these things. Some things cannot be tolerated and must be cut away so that the rest can be saved. We don't know where she is or whose she's with. She has bought shame and disgrace upon the name of your household. We see that she is pregnant and there is no way to know who the father is. Several of my own young men have been caught in her clutches. You are the betrothed and therefore the most aggrieved. She has taken your marriage rite and squandered it on riotous living. We have passed out the word to other temples. She is a fugitive. When she is apprehended it will be your duty as the aggrieved betrothed, the cuckold if you will, to demand the full justice of Moses. This is a cancer that must be cut out."

"You are one of us and we have a proud tradition that must be honoured. We cannot let it be besmirched. Come to temple on Sunday and we will have an extraordinary meeting behind closed doors and you can hear the awful truth and hear the confessions of our own lost flock. Then we should ask you to do your duty as one of the guardians of our flock. We shall read Moses and we shall put things right. Pray, read your Torah for its edicts are true. I'm sorry to give you such sad news, we tried our best but the demon inside her was to her liking. Can you tell her parents, her family are well respected and stalwarts of the community. They will understand the requirements. Shalom."

Chapter 18: Answers from above

The boy turns to home in bewilderment and disbelief. How can the girl have changed so much in four short years. He has been so focused on getting everything prepared for the new life they were going to have that his daydreams had become real. Now they lay shattered on the dirt. He felt like crying but he would have to be strong for her parents, after all they were family to him. How would it change. He was fearful of the judgements he was being asked to pronounce. The law of Moses was clear. He has a duty as part of

this community to uphold its values. His is heartbroken, torn and has seen his whole future shatter like so much glass.

He stops at an inn to drown his sorrows and to gain such Dutch courage that he can to take this terrible news to her parents. He remembers how her father had waxed about her virtue, her able wit, her sense of destiny, her delicateness and her kind disposition. Things he wanted in a partner. Now he was condemned to lay charges against her as the betrothed and to demand that the law of Moses which bound them all together should be upheld so that the people could be saved.

The inn is a raucous place. There were good time girls, prostitutes really. Here the observant weren't so observant. Out of sight of watchful eyes they engaged in a rowdiness and behaviour alien to that seen on the street.

Sitting in a corner by himself, trying to get his thoughts together he watched the others around him. Later a girl came up to him and asked if he would like some company. She was a pretty thing, with a bright smile and a sadness behind the eyes which could not stay hidden. He was about to wave her away when her handler came into the room. She was visibly nervous.

"What's the matter girl?" he asked quietly. "You can tell me. I won't let anything harm you."

Sensing his torment and gentleness the girl says. "My family is poor and my father fell to drink and became violent, my mother couldn't cope. We have a large family, so it was decided that I should go into service and send money home to the family for my brothers and sisters. This man came and said that he would give me a job, I would be well looked after and would be a boon to my family. The arrangements were made and he paid an allowance to my parents and said I would be able to send more once I was settled. He took me away from home and on the first night forced himself upon me as I was his property. I didn't like it and tried to resist. When he saw that I was unwilling he vowed to get his money back from such a distasteful purchase, so he bought me here and put me to work. I must help in the kitchens and the waiting and I have to entertain such customers as they see fit. I must go and put myself out there without choice. If I don't earn enough money I am beaten, but if I do well in his eyes he sometimes sends a little help to my parents. Dad is trying not to drink and mum is doing her best and I know the little that he sends them from my labours is helping. Its a bit better for my brothers and sisters and I don't want to happen to them as happens to me. Please come upstairs, I will make you happy and it would be nice to be with a gentle man for a change."

The girl's plight touches the young boy and despite his misgivings he accompanies her upstairs.

Once in the room the girl becomes all professional. “Here wash yourself in this bowl, put the money on the counter.” He doesn’t know what to do. Where is that frail girl he met moments ago? He is reluctant while she sits waiting on the bed.

“Com’on, hurry up, if we’re quick I might still be able to get another few customers before the night is over.”

He looks at her, the soft frailness has gone and is replaced by a harsh bitterness which shows around the lines of her mouth. He smells the rankness of her hair and the whiff of something not too clean.

However he is sure that the story she told him downstairs is the truth. Is this what happens to abandoned girls, is this the future life for them? So much sadness and so much hopelessness, so much anger.

In a moment of clarity he sees that he cannot place this future on the girl to whom he is betrothed. Her parents would be heartbroken and they have been so good to him. They had such dreams of a brighter tomorrow and now it is his duty to break their hearts.

“I’m sorry darling,” he says to the girl. “Here is the money, you don’t have to do anything. It is not my job to demand payment in flesh or otherwise. Thank you for sharing your story. Now I know that I don’t wish to be an abuser. I wish you well. I’m sorry for your plight. If you ever find the courage to walk away know that I will help. I can be found at the carpentry shop.”

“Don’t you like me?” pouted the girl.

“Yes I do, that’s precisely why I cannot buy or sell you,” replied the boy. “You have been a great help. I have a conundrum that I must deal with and you have shone a light. Thank you again. I will pay for the whole night and leave by the back stairs and you can have a good sleep knowing that you have your night’s money and don’t need to be anybody’s plaything for this night.”

Kissing her tenderly he left by the back stairs.

The girl can’t believe what has just happened. He took nothing, treated her with respect, made sure that she would not be beaten for non achievement. So much different from the fat, smelly and boorish men that were the norm. It was a relief not to have to lay under a sweat soaked loser hating herself as she said unfelt mouthings and feigned an enjoyment, when all she truly felt was degraded.

“Well girl, she says to herself, looks like you got the night off. Best make the most of it they don’t come by very often.” She rose washed her face and hands in the bowl. Locking the door with a do not disturb sign she settled into a relaxing refreshing and undisturbed sleep. Such luxury! was her last thought as she turned out the candle.

Chapter 19: Compassion

The boy wandered back to the workshop a little unsteadily. He wasn’t used to strong drink. He thought of the woman he had left behind, of the strange juxtaposition of frailty and hard heartedness. He didn’t want that for the girl regardless of what she had done.

He doesn’t really owe any loyalty to the faith. It is not the faith that has been good and kind to him. It is the girl’s mother and father. They love the girl and they have enough heartache in store. He hates to be the bearer of bad news, but he couldn’t let the priests tell the story to the parents. Even as he was speaking with them and they were loudly professing sorrow and compassion, he had felt that it was insincere. They were looking over their own shoulders. They had been her guardians, the trust was with them, and now they wanted to bury their mistakes. Hide it away as though it never happened.

Poor girl. All those years in this institution when you could have been at home helping your mother. Instead we opted to remove her from home to prepare for a future that was beyond her comprehension. He remembers how afraid and lonely and hungry he was. Her family have been great to him. He will bring the bad tidings and then together they will decide the course of action.

The father is observant but not churchgoing, preferring to say his prayers quietly by himself. He doesn’t wear the vestment robes, he avoids the high days and holy day but even so observes a dedication. The boy feels that there is more truth in his way.

Arriving back at the workshop he calls the father and mother. “You will be wanting to know why I was summoned to the temple. I’m afraid that its all very sad news. It appears that your daughter has absconded and they don’t know where she is. They have passed word to other temples and all are on the lookout for her but they are claiming that she has become a good time girl and has run off with a bandit crowd. She has been gone two days. They had much to tell me of her miscreants, they accuse her of giving way to a lecherous demon and becoming a Jezebel and of leading the young novitiates astray with her wild and unfettered ways. They described a girl I don’t remember or imagine. True, it has been four years and life changes a lot at that age. I feel so sad for you. I know how fond you are of her and how much you wished good things and you have been good to me and given me a life when all seemed lost. I cannot do that for you, but this I can do. As the betrothed I have the right of decision. The priests have pushed for condemnation as an adulteress and I understand under the tradition that is true and she is an adulteress

and as betrothed I have the right to demand my honour is upheld and the law requires it. But you have been good to me. Now the only family I remember, and the girl, I remember her as a bright 10 year old, I want the best for you and her. I am told she is with child and it is impossible to know who the father is as there are so many choices. Well This choice belongs to me. I can withstand the demands of the temple. After all I'm really a gentile."

"Can you allow the girl to come home and live the sheltered life here with you so that she be not abused. I last night met a girl who fell into a similar situation and I do not want your daughter to inherit her estate. And a grandchild is a wonderful compensation."

"Would you?" exclaimed the father. "My daughter may have done wrong and be a shame to me but she is still our daughter and we love her and will believe in her. Maybe it was that accursed place where we sent her to equip her for life that has been the cause of this. We should have kept her safe at home but we both so wanted you to have all the goodness that life brings. Now it is gone. We will understand once this matter is settled if you have to go away. You are now a better carpenter than me and can put your skills to good use anywhere. You will always be in demand. But I also know that you were looking towards the future we had tried to map out and understand that it would be difficult to live in this compound with all its broken dreams and someone's bastard to remind you everyday of lost hopes. You have seen enough tragedy in you life. Please do this for us. Refuse to condemn our daughter so that she may live. We will bring her home when she is found and she can live out her days as a prisoner of our compound away from the gossip and looks. We can spare her that, but there will be many who will take delight in her undoing so it grieves us to know that she will not have the fullness that my wife and I have experienced. But the grandchild will be in our midst and perhaps God will grant that this shame only last for one generation and then the future can be bright again. We will sorely miss you, we have come to love you but we understand some pains you don't need to be reminded of."

Chapter 20: Rejecting evil

That Sabbath he is called to the temple, there is to be a meeting and matters discussed. He attends alone.

They waste no time laying down a liturgy of faults and a tale of wilful disobedience. They castigate the girl as a strumpet, wanton, headstrong and disobedient. They call for the full measure of the law. The people must be protected and shielded from such promiscuous behaviour, such wanton abandon, the wholesale embrace of the pleasures of the flesh and the delight in carnality is a bad example which will lead many others astray. She must be dealt with as prescribed by law and tradition. The vote is unanimous. She is to be stoned to death as the only right punishment. What does he say? the cuckolded fiancée? He is the most disgraced and as betrothed it is his right to make the decision. This builds at him ever more pressure to conform to the group directive.

The boy feels overwhelmed. He is not used to people demanding that he be the decision maker. It's easy enough on a building site when you are dealing with rocks and timber but this is someone's life. Do you have to carry the burdens of sin heavily for all your life?

He remembers being young and vulnerable and desperate. He remembers the night with the whole village looking for him and his heart on his sleeve afraid of another bashing which could end his life. Of the hunger, Loss and complete bewilderment he experienced. Then being discovered by the father and finding no escape how he became resigned to being dreadfully hurt maybe killed and then a miracle! The man's wife didn't see a thief, she didn't see a foul attacker, she didn't see a criminal. She saw a small frightened and abused boy and demanded that he be shown love and not judgement. He remembers how she fed him and washed his face and dressed his wounds always singing softly in a gentle melodious voice and how it was her that turned her husband and all the good that had come into his life because of her. He could do as much as them in the very least.

It was now his time to address the congregation. They were expecting a simple nod to their plans. Hadn't the whole meeting dwelt on the prescribed punishments. Were there not enough witnesses to the girls wanton behaviour? Here she was, a runaway unable to be bought before the judgement but they could sentence her in absentia and then any congregation anywhere could apprehend her and deal the full measure of the law indiscriminately and with a finality that ensured the continuance of the tradition they held so dear.

"Brothers and sisters, I am aware of the accusations and the prescribed punishment and I believe that the law of Moses is a good thing given by God. But I have a quandary. When I was young and my people couldn't keep me they apprenticed me to the girls father and his family became my family. I had never known such kindness and I know that the girl is the apple of their eye. How proud I was when they proposed our marriage. In only a few short years I would have everything a man can aspire to. A trade able to support us, a beautiful wife able to give me many children and with the ability to be beside me running the show together. A real team born of consensus and shared goals. I am not ashamed to tell you that I looked forward to the wedding night and the inheritance that would become mine and I have worked long and hard to get everything ready. Now on the eve of realising this dream I find that it is all mist and my worst fears are realised. I was angry and wanted satisfaction and repayment for the hurt I was feeling, and the council I received showed a clear path that I should take and I was prepared to want the full punishment of the law."

"But then God intervened, and he showed me someone who had strayed and the depths that had taken her to, and I remember a bright 6 year old full of life and happiness, adventure and an abdominal spirit. And I remember my life before someone took pity on my lowly estate. My life could have been all so different but I am before you today as the beneficiary of a greater good, a compassion for my circumstances and a belief that I

could be made for better things. This saved my life, and although things are not going to happen as I intended I still was saved. So this is my decision and it is irrevocable for as the wounded party it is my right to insist on my honour being upheld and my wishes being carried out."

"I revoke the law of Moses! Allow her to live out her days in her father's compound, out of sight and condemnation. Let her remain as a widow in her father's home. Let no harm come to her or any child she may bear. Her parents are my parents and if it is their wish that she be spared then it is also mine. This is my final word! Once she is found she is to be returned home without judgement and she will remain with her parents to care for them in their old age. I shall go forth to seek my way in the world. You are bound to respect my wishes for as the damaged party I have the right to make demands. Let no harm come to the girl. Let your agents know that. She is to returned to her father's house. I have spoken and it is final."

It took a lot of courage to stand before the whole congregation and speak against the mood of the whole meeting. But his mind was made up. He would stay until she was found and returned home then he would take his swag and march out into the world. Alone again after all. Well it had been good while it lasted.

Much murmurings at the meeting, but his position is unassailable and his wishes must be respected. However, the guilty parties were very unhappy with the decision. It would be so convenient if the whole affair could be swept under the carpet, buried as it were with the foul seductress of whom only gossip and innuendo would remain. Now she would reside in her father's house, silent witness to their machinations, impotent perhaps but still present. Not ideal but there was no choice.

Chapter 21: The auntie's story

Meanwhile, back at the auntie's house the girl is destroyed. It is a blessing that her uncle is away at his duties. The two women, niece and auntie have time to talk.

The girl tells her shameful story. She admits to having enjoyed most of her encounters and she was proud to have been selected by God. Now she sees that she was deceived by those who only thought of themselves. She had thought that they had cared for her, in fact she had deceived herself. What was to become of her?

Patiently listening the aunt decides to share with the girl her own story. Maybe it will help the girl to accept her situation, to understand that God can bring good out of even the most awful situation.

“Girl,” said the auntie, “I have a story to share with you. As you can see I am now going to be a mother and God has taken away my barrenness. But it hasn’t come about in a fairy-tale way. I too, went through great abuse and distress and at my darkest hour God offered me a lifeline and through this lifeline I am able to find beauty out of ashes.”

“Let me start at the beginning. Your uncle was away from home about his duties, when one morning I woke before the dawn. I wanted to go to the river while everybody was still sleeping and take a ritual bath. So I went to the part of the river where the current is strong and people would not bathe for fear of being swept away, but I knew of a small pool sheltered from the current where I could bathe freely. While I was bathing two soldiers came upon me. They were drunk and up to no good. One of them grabbed me by the hair and dragged me from the pool naked. ‘She is no lass,’ growled the second, ‘but she has a tidy figure and I am feeling for some sport.’ With this he slapped me so hard I fell to the ground dazed. I felt one of them grab me and hold my arms above my head leaving me exposed and the other grabbed my legs and forced himself upon me. I screamed and begged but they took no notice. They took turns with me and they were violent. I drifted in and out of consciousness and the nightmare seemed to go on forever. I heard them speaking among themselves. They planned to cast me into the raging torrent when they had exhausted their abuses and I would be drowned and there would be no witness to their actions. I was without strength and I was hurting and I resigned myself to the fates. They decided I should pleasure them with my mouth and although they beat me and threatened me I would not loose my jaw. This enraged them so they decided they would sodomise me. When the first entered me with such roughness I cried out in pain. Suddenly, the soldier holding me while the other abused me let go of me, and I saw him fall into the torrent and a man then grabbed the one who was sodomising me and threw him also into the torrent and he also was swept away.”

“Then in the midst of this nightmare, I felt a gentle hand upon me saying ‘its OK now, its all over. Here let me help you into your garments and I will assist you home where you can be safe.’ With this he laid garments on me to shield my nakedness and half carrying me bought me home. When he saw I was alone he fetched and heated water, took some herbs from his bag and made a balm and cleaned and dressed my wounds, he gave me a sleeping potion and told me I was to rest. He would be there when I awoke so I would not be alone and I was safe. When I woke I was in my own bed, sore and bruised and the horrors of the previous day returned. Then again I felt a gentle touch, it was my saviour. ‘Be calm,’ he said, ‘it is over. What is done is done and cannot be undone. You will have to make peace with it, but for now, eat this broth I have made, let me dress your wounds again and take this sleeping potion and when you awake next time you will feel much stronger.’”

“For three days this was the pattern. When I awoke on the fourth day I was feeling much stronger, my bruising’s had subsided and some of my strength had returned. It hurt to get out of bed and to walk. I saw that the house was tidy and that there was food on the table. I was wondering what had happened when my rescuer opened the door. ‘Don’t be

afraid,' he said, 'you are safe at home and I will take care of you until you are recovered or until there is someone who can take over your care. Have you no family?' I told him that I have a husband who is about his duties and would not be back until the day of the new moon some 3 weeks away. 'Then I will stay,' said the man who introduced himself as John."

"He explained that he was on a pilgrimage, and had risen very early, when he heard my cries and stealing up quietly he had come across my plight. Keeping himself hidden he crept up close and seeing that the soldiers were occupied with their actions he saw the opportunity to push one into the torrent and if he was fast enough he would be able to grab the other and deal a similar treatment. This he did, and in doing so saved my life for it was sure that the soldiers wished no witness. He covered my nakedness, bought me home and tended me. It was so strange, the juxtaposition between so much abuse and so much care. After a week I was able to leave the bed and begin to do things about the house."

"John continued to stay and to help with the chores and to treat my wounds and to talk to me gently. He restored a faith in me with his gentleness and caring, asking nothing for himself, it was like a guardian angel. He spoke of hope and of the courage to continue. We talked and he read to me from the scriptures and eased my fears."

Chapter 22: The aunt's dilemma

"Now a new and more horrifying thought entered my mind. I have only ever been with my husband. Now I had been with two other men. What if I was pregnant? Would there be a child growing within me to remind me daily of this terrible experience. How could I love such a child even when a child is my dearest wish? It might not be too hard to keep what has happened from my husband, but how would I deal with it, to look everyday at the child and see the events. It is too horrible. How could I live with this? Gradually an idea began to form. What would it be if I could see the child and instead of seeing the horrors I could instead believe that the child came out of rescue and tenderness. What if I could believe that the child was born out of the care and love that John was showing me. What if I could believe that the child was John's. It cannot be my husband's, and it would be better if he never knew of the events. This idea took hold and I came to see it as a way to the future. I was feeling better and my wounds were mostly healed and I could see that John was getting ready to resume his pilgrimage. My husband would be home in a week and he would never need to know."

"If I was to seduce John I could imagine that the child if there is one was his and I could continue my wifely duties towards my husband and he would never know or have to deal with the pain. That last night while John was sleeping, ready for his departure in the morning I rose from my bed, removed my garments and lay down with John. He awoke to find me caressing and kissing him and when he went to stay my hand for I was another

man's wife I said to him. 'I am near the turn of life and have had no children but I also have never been with another man so it may be my husband who is barren and not me. If I am with child I cannot live with the thought that a child could have been born out of my abuse. I need to be able to believe that it is conceived through love and care. Please please allow me this fiction that I may live and not die.'"

"John looked at me for the longest time and then said. 'I have not sought to take advantage of you and wish no harm upon your life or marriage, but I do understand what you say.' With this he reached out brushed my face with his hand and bent to kiss me. It felt strange to kiss another man but he was tender, patient and skilful. He made love to me in a way that allowed me to respond at my own pace and I lost all fear and it was a wondrous coupling. I fell asleep in his arms and when I awoke he was gone. I don't even know his last name! When my husband returned home hungry for me, I was able to accept him when I had been so afraid that I would not be able to for the memories it might bring back. Weeks later it became obvious I was with child and my husband was delighted. I do not know who is the father of this growing child but I can believe it is John's or even my husband's, and I know I can now love this child as a gift from God. Perhaps it is possible for you to know that your child will also be a gift from God and the fulfilment of womanhood."

Over the next days the two women talked and gradually the girl came to accept the new life growing within her and came to rejoice at this new love seeded within her.

Chapter 23: The uncle's dilemma

When the uncle returned home from his duties he was morose, sullen and uncommunicative. Before this tour of duty, a local gossip had told him that there had been a man staying in his house while he was away on his previous assignment. He returned home full of rage at this deception and had demanded to know. Had there been a man? The wife broke down and sobbing she retold all the events. She held nothing back and begged her husband to understand. Hadn't she been through enough. Wasn't he glad that she had been saved, nursed and cared for. If it hadn't been for John she would have been killed. If it hadn't been for John she wouldn't have had the courage to live. As it was, they still had a life before them.

He was horrified at his wife's testimony but he believed her and tried to put away the thoughts of her infidelity and of seeing her as damaged goods. He tried to be understanding and caring, but his mind would not let go of the idea and he wrestled with it constantly. He was in a dark place and he begged God to give him the grace that his wife so sorely needed. But the torment persisted.

Seeing the girl, and her state, the uncle wondered at the fickleness of women. Hadn't he trained and taught her betrothed? Hadn't he seen that the betrothed was a good and sincere man and hadn't he grown fond of him in the time they were together? Wasn't it all for this girl? And yet here she was unmarried and pregnant, not knowing who was the father of her child. Why were women so shameless? He didn't want her child there to taunt his own situation. He immediately drafted a letter to the girl's father asking if he would come and collect her. One bastard in the household would be enough. Afraid of his dark thoughts he decided not to speak for fear of what he might say. And he refused to speak with either of them.

Later the letter to the girls parents arrived telling them of her whereabouts and condition and requesting that someone should come and collect her. The parents feeling were mixed, overjoyed that she was alive and safe, distraught that she was undone, sad that the very promising future they had planned out was in tatters. Now they needed to collect her but how could they arrange it. The father wasn't able to travel and the journey was too much for the wife. Who could they send?

Finally they decided that they must ask the boy if he would go and bring her. It would be difficult for him but they had no one else. Calling him to their table they sat him down and showed him the letter. They knew it was a lot to ask but they had no one else. The boy agreed, he would finish the job he was on then he would set out to retrieve the girl. It would be several days before he would be able to leave and the journey would take two weeks there and perhaps longer back, but all being well within two months she would be home. He would need to take their donkey as she wouldn't be able to make such a hard journey in her condition.

The boy sets off.

Chapter 24: Caring for the aunt

When he arrived at the house to fetch the girl it was nearing the time for the aunt to give birth. She had been unwell these last weeks and needed to rest. This late pregnancy was taking a toll on her health and stamina. Her husband was again away with his duties and even when he had been home he constantly busied himself with church matters. He didn't like to be in the house with the two pregnant women.

He told the girl that he had come to collect her and return her to her father's house but the girl resisted. She said to him, "I know I have been a great disappointment to you and the life we had mapped out is gone and I am to live my life out in shame in my father's compound and I thank you for not requiring the full punishment of the law. I did not mean to hurt you, I was foolish and deceived and thought pride at great things promised when in truth I was undone. But I cannot leave my auntie now. She is near her time and

there is no one to look after and care for her. Please stay with us until she is delivered so that I might care for her. She needs me as I have needed her."

The boy agrees, after all, the auntie was kind to him when he was here studying and he can see that this is a late pregnancy and that she cannot cope alone. He sees that the two women are good to each other and that the girl is tirelessly shouldering the burden of care for the woman and of the chores and home-making, the cooking, the cleaning all of the household duties.

He often sits with the aunt to keep her company while the girl tends to the household and they talk. He asks the aunt why the uncle is so changed, not happy and joking as he was when he had stayed with them before.

The aunt is quiet for a long time. "I will tell you," she finally says, "it may be that it will help you understand the girl. She's a good girl. Would have made a fine wife, but she too has a difficult story to face."

She then relates all of the events which have happened to herself, leaving nothing out.

"So you can see why my husband is having a hard time. I have lived with him for 35 years and I know he is a good man and he will come to terms with events and he will be a good father, but for now only our prayers can help him find the courage to overcome. It is hard but you being here is a help."

The boy is shocked. He remembers the abuses he suffered and how kindness overcame. He also speaks with the girl. She too is candid about how she came to be in this position. He sees that she has been deceived by those who knew how to manipulate her childish dreams.

He begins to think about the child growing within the girl. It will need a father and the girl's father has shown him that it is possible to love someone else's child as if it was your own. More than that he sees the dignity with which the two women give each other and his heart softens for the girl. A closeness begins to build between them.

Chapter 25: Grace and reconciliation

The uncle is in church praying. Begging God to allow him to put past the terrible thoughts he has. One night while praying he has this thought. "What if I could see the coming child not as someone else's bastard, what if I could see him as a gift from John, just as John saved my wife's life and tended her and returned her to me, able to deal with the things that happened in my absence. What if there would have been no John. I would have a

murdered wife and no future, but now I will have my wife back and a child for comfort in our old age. If my wife can put this past behind her and embrace the future could I do that also?" This thought begins to take hold and pushes the darker thoughts aside.

One day the boy rushes into the temple. "Quickly it is time, you must come home now for the labour is started." Gathering his bag the uncle follows the boy back to the house to find that his wife has already given birth to a baby boy.

There are others there, asking for a name for the child. The aunt tells them that the child is to be called John. They question her; Why John? There are no members of your family called John, choose another name. The aunt insists that the child be called John, when at that moment the husband and the boy arrive. The crowd ask him for a name for the child, a proper family name. The husband looks at them and then taking a piece of paper he writes on it. HIS NAME IS JOHN. Turning towards his wife cradling the child, he in a moment of light sees that he has gained rather than lost. His wife loves him, her greatest loss has been recovered and this child will only know him as father. A feeling of immense joy overtakes him and he loudly blesses God for his goodness and mercy. Taking the babe in his arms he kisses his wife and tells him how sorry he is for his thoughts. All is good!

Falling to his knees, raising his hands towards heaven he intones:

Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, who has come to his people and set them free. He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, born of the house of his servant David. Through his holy prophets God promised of old to save us from our enemies, from the hands of all that hate us, To show mercy to our ancestors, and to remember his holy covenant. This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham: to set us free from the hands of our enemies, Free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life. And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, To give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of all their sins. In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Chapter 26: Returning home

The boy and the girl stay on and at the 8th day they attend the baby's circumcision event. As is customary, they remain with the new mother for the full month after birth and then get ready to begin the return journey. It will take them 3 weeks and the girl is now in her third trimester and although she is young and healthy she tires easily and is often uncomfortable.

A message arrives from the parents of the girl. The temple authorities in the town have wind of her return and there is gossip everywhere. People love to talk and to judge by appearances. They enjoy being horrified by scandal. If you can come in unnoticed it would be better. You will be safe at home but it may feel ugly on the streets. There will be those who whisper and stare, make crude jokes, even shout and spit.

The boy and the girl steal into the home compound in the early hours of morning and are quickly taken inside.

“Thank goodness you are safe,” said the mother. “We have been so worried. This is such a messed up business, there is so much to be dealt with, at least we are all together in one place. Daughter are you in good health, does the baby cause you much hardship?”

“No mother,” said the girl. “Aunty has taken very good care of me and helped me in ways that are fantastic, and she is now the mother of a baby boy called John. Uncle is so proud! Claims he’s going to be the best father a child ever knew. You should see him praising God for this blessing. He seems truly happy.”

“Well that’s a welcome change of perspective. At least there is some good news, praise be! Well let’s just enjoy this moment. You two must be dusty from your journey, go wash up while I prepare breakfast for us all, then you can go sleep, I’m sure you’re very tired.”

Washed and changed and feeling much better the boy and the girl join her parents, for it is no longer their parents. At the table is bread and olives cheese eggs water and wine.

“Before we eat,” said the father, “let us join hands and pray. I have wanted you all here under the one roof for what seems the longest time. I wish to give thanks with you.”

“Father your ways are not our ways and your thoughts are not our thoughts, just as the heavens are above the earth so are your ways above ours. We trust that you will bring beauty out of ashes as you have done for us before. Out of certain defeat we rose victorious by the practical application of your word and the guidance you give. Please we beg you, shine the light of your wisdom so that we can safely navigate the rushing waters. Blessed be your name.”

They eat, a surprisingly quiet meal. The many adjustments they need to face weighing heavily upon everyone’s thoughts. But it is a peaceful meal and it feels right. When at last the father excuses himself as he must be about the morning’s chores and there is the donkey to be attended to. The boy rises to assist.

“No,” said the man, “you have done enough for one day, go get some sleep.”

The mother has already risen to start clearing the dishes. Turning to the girl she said, “leave this to me, go now to my bed and get some rest, you are no longer alone in your needs.” Turning to the boy she said, “and you take her room. The bed is comfortable and you must be very tired.”

“Thank you I am. Good night.”

Drawing the curtains he lays down in the dark for the longest time. He just cannot reconcile the girl he knew as a child and this child woman he has seen over the last couple of months with the scandalous tales and behaviour that he is told is her way. What was his life to be now? He would be leaving this for the unknown. Alone again. Eventually he slept.

The girl on the other hand went quickly to sleep but her dreams were troubled. She felt she was battling against a rushing tide trying to protect something clutched to her breast while the tide was trying to tear it away. She awoke sweating, dark and unfamiliar, it took her a moment to get her bearings. It was still light outside, she could hear her mother bustling in the kitchen, she patted her stomach. “Hello my gift from God,” she said. “Don’t you worry. I will hold you close during the worst storms. I will be there in your day and your night. You will never be alone. And you will be my consolation and my glory. A receiver of love in your youth and a giver of love in my old age.”

Turning on her side she drifted into sleep.

Chapter 27: Weight of public opinion

People notice that the boy is back. That the father no longer needs to borrow a donkey. They suspect that the girl is in her fathers house.

The mother hears snide remarks when shopping, unusual silences. The father gets an order cancelled, then another. Things feel very uncomfortable. The girl is now in her 7th month. She hasn’t been outside the compound for many weeks.

The boy says to the father, “Its not good for her to be here locked away. The people of the village seem to delight in gossip. Every time he has to go about the village he can feel their stares and whisperings’. The feeling of being mocked and judged is so hard to accept. If he is having such a hard time dealing with the innuendo how much more difficult for the girl. He has heard that they are looking for carpenters for a project in the town of the auntie and uncle. Perhaps it would be good to take the girl back to their house where no one knows and where she can be free of the projected shame. Where the auntie is there to help her and where the uncle can get him employed on the project. This

living in a fishbowl makes it hard to enjoy the sunshine. It would be good if they can leave this past behind."

The parents see that the girl is trying her best to accept her situation, she is struggling manfully to do her best for the household. If it was not for the love that she holds for the unborn child she could easily fall into a deep depression, a suicidal depression could easily overcome her. They are very worried for her. Their own misgivings about her behaviour as described by the priests begin to subside as they watch her going about the chores of the house, her dutifulness, the way she in moments alone speaks to the life growing within her, her resolution to protect and nurture this new life speaks volumes about a love that she has to give.

They have also heard of a building project back in the city of the aunt. Her husband is well connected and will be able to secure a job for him. After all he's going to have to leave sometime. Maybe now would be a good time for him to take the girl back to the aunts. Let her be in a secure environment. She and the auntie can help each other and it'll give him somewhere to be while he establishes himself. And they shouldn't wait. Every passing day makes the journey harder for her.

This is a really difficult decision for the parents, she's been gone so long but they also see that the pressure on her is taking its toll. So they agree.

Chapter 28: Back at the auntie's and uncle's

The next morning the boy and the pregnant girl leave for the city. Travelling in the cool of the mornings and late evenings and using a tent for the heat of the days they travel at a leisurely pace. A kindred companionship at shared tasks and purpose forms. They begin to chat easily and laugh, finding pleasure in the freedom of feeling unknown to the stares. No one to judge them. It's nice to be out of the harsh judgemental gaze, to feel free from the stares and whispering, to be in a company of care that they give to each other. They share the tasks that must be done while on the road. The girl never complains even though the boy can see that she tires easily and is often uncomfortable and he tries his best to ease the burden for her.

After about 2 and a half weeks they arrive at their destination and are greeted joyfully by the aunt and uncle who had been concerned at their late arrival and ask if they have had any trouble on the journey.

"No," said the boy, "we have actually had a very nice trip. We travelled slowly as the girl tires easily and she has never complained and certainly carried her share of the tasks. Surprising how good a meal she can make on the road."

“Well,” says the auntie, “I’m sure that it will do you good to take some rest, but before you do come and look at little John who is sleeping. You won’t believe how much he has grown since you left. He’s a lovely placid baby and so much fun to be with.”

“Never mind that,” said the uncle. “My boy is a gift from God and destined to great things. I’m amazed at how much joy fatherhood has given me. Such a strapping lad. Come boy, lets leave the ladies to their coo cooing, come into my room and we can talk and share a refreshing libation. I have been speaking to one of the foremen from the project and he says they can always use a competent carpenter. I hope your skills are as good as I have told him they are.”

“Well,” said the boy, “I was taught by your brother in law and he always seems to be in demand for his skills and he has said that he thinks I am now good enough to be beyond his teaching. How that can be, I don’t know? For everything I have learnt is from him. I think its just because I’m younger and stronger that makes it seem that I’m better, but he was a very good teacher. I know how to read a piece of wood to get the best from it. I’m sure that they won’t be disappointed with my work. After all from here I have to make my own way in the world so it would be good to save up some travelling funds and to get some experience working on such a big project with so many other trades and people.”

“Good,” said the uncle. “I will take you down to meet the foreman for lunch tomorrow with a view to starting the day after. Will that be too soon? Would you rather rest a few days before plunging in?”

“No,” answered the boy. “Now that I have accepted that life has changed, and a new future has to be embraced I am eager to get started and see where God will lead me.”

“OK,” said the uncle, “after breakfast tomorrow I will take you to meet him. Bring some tools with you just in case he wants to put you to a test. Go wash and go to bed now, its late and you must be very tired.”

The next morning when the boy rose he came into the kitchen to find the girl singing quietly and happily to herself as she ground the meal to make the breakfast cakes. The uncle was still sleeping and the aunt was busy feeding and caring for her child.

“You seem very happy,” said the boy to the girl, “is pounding meal such a joyous task?”

“Its not the task that makes me happy,” replied the girl, “although its not so arduous when you are making it for those you love.”

“Does that include me?” questioned the boy taken aback.

“You,” said the girl, “have been amazing. I know what has happened. I know that you were pressured to condemn me and without my parents asking you decided that I and this child should be protected. It made my parents very happy even in what seemed to be such dark times. That took a lot of courage and has cost you a lot and yet even with that you have not reproached me but instead have done everything to harbour me. Such kindness is impossible to repay and I will be sorry to see you go, but while you are here I shall do my best to be of every assistance to you. Here, sit down, the tea is ready and here are some figs for you while I make the oatcakes. There is some honey to put on them so they will be sweet in your mouth.”

“Thanks,” said the boy, “I am hungry. Is there anything I can do to help?

“I’m not made of sugar,” said the girl, “I wont melt, please let me do what I can to make your days easier, you have done so much for us. Its the least I can do and it gives me pleasure to be able to do something in return. The cakes won’t be a minute, I’ll go and call uncle for breakfast.”

The uncle came into the room to find the breakfast on the table. The tea poured and a place ready.

“Bloody hell,” said the uncle, “this is a change. Since the baby arrived I’ve had to wait for my breakfast till the wife has dealt with him. Then she hands him to me to play with while she makes the food. I must admit sometimes my belly is growling by the time food is on the table.”

The girl laughed, “don’t you worry about that any more, as now there are two women who love you and would like to look after you. I’m going to see that your meals will be as good as I can make them and at the table on-time. Are you going to the worksite today?”

“Yes immediately after breakfast,” replied the uncle, “men are coming from everywhere for the work and we would hate to be too late to be selected.”

“Well eat up then,” urged the girl, then turning to the boy she said, “can you leave me your travel and work clothes, I know they are very dirty after our trip and I saw that there was some small repairs that need to be addressed. If you give them to me I will fix it today so you will be ready to start work tomorrow.”

“Don’t go putting the cart before the horse,” said the boy, “the jobs not mine yet.”

“Don’t be silly,” rejoined the girl, “If my dad says your good, then you are good and they will be fortunate to have you. Can I get you anything more? Some tea perhaps, have you

had enough to eat? I've made more so there's plenty."

"Thanks," answered the boy, "but I've already had four, any more and I will be too bloated to show them how I can work. It was delicious by the way. Come uncle, let us offer a prayer for success and I will gather my tools and we can be off."

"Not before you bring me your washing and repairs," commanded the girl.

"Gee your a bossy taskmaster," said the boy, "but anything for the peace. I will go and get them".

He returned shortly with a clothes bundle and his tool bag ready to go, the uncle was outside feeding the chickens and goat.

"Before you go," said the girl, "put these biscuits in your bag, you don't know how long it will take on a busy site like that and you may get peckish. I made these a bit earlier with sesame seeds and honey so they will give you energy if you feel your flagging. I know God is going to repay you for your kindness and faithfulness, so go knowing that you will carry my blessing and that of my unborn babe. We owe you so much."

"Listen girl," he said, "put no onus of duty or cost on what I have done. It is less than your parents have done for me. You will be happy and safe here with your uncle and aunt, nobody here knows your story, You will be safe in this compound and you two women will be a big help to each other. Hopefully I will be working all hours putting together my future stake and your uncle is about to go on his rotation with the temple so she will be glad of the company and help. Thanks again for the food it was great. Bye now."

As he turned to leave he felt her hand take his and turning towards her she lifted his hand to her lips. Placing a quick kiss upon it she said, "I couldn't send you off without a kiss for luck, thank you again for everything you have done."

"Bye," said the boy gruffly, "I'll let you know how it goes. Bye."

Chapter 29: The interview

The uncle and the boy set out towards the building site, the sun was still low in the sky, the air still cool, an early morning rain has dampened the dust and the two men walked companionably along the road. "Tell me about the man we're going to meet," said the boy.

“Well he’s an old friend, I have circumcised his two boys and buried his father. He’s getting on a bit now, not as old as me but he and I are good friends. I’m sure he will like you.”

The walk to the project took about 45 mins. The sun had risen, and the heat from it was chasing away the chill of the day.

“Remember to keep water with you,” said the uncle, “it can get very hot here and working exposed to the day sometimes causes men to faint if they don’t have enough water with them. I know most of your work has been in workshops so this will be harder, which is why they are paying such a good rate. You will stay with us for free and I won’t have it any other way. You were a good help to us last time you were here and it costs us so little to keep you and your such good company and help. Last time when you came I was in a bad place, and there was something about the way you contained your own pain and reached out that really helped me with the thoughts I was carrying. Its funny, out of the wrong came something sweet, out of the pain came something great. I’m probably the happiest I’ve ever been in my life. Whoda thunk it! Ahh here we are, let me ask around for my friend. Wait here.”

The boy placed his bag under a tree and sat down to wait. All around him was hustle and bustle. There were people making bricks, moving stones and scaffolding around. Men shouting, occasional laughter, often grunting and cursing. The sun rose and the heat grew. Carts came and went bringing loads and taking loads away. The place was a hive of activity. He looked around with awe. Sure, he and the girl’s father had built houses and stores before but never on this scale and for the last few years they had concentrated more on cabinet making as the father’s leg made site work difficult for him.

Over the back he saw a shanty town, smoke coming from lots of cooking fires, there were women and children there. He could see them playing, washing, gossiping, arguing. This must be the workers quarters he thought to himself. I wonder where all these people came from?.

“Boy boy,” he heard the uncle call, “come over here and meet my friend that I have told you about.”

Gathering up his bag he hurried over to be greeted by a bear of a man with a fine black beard touched with a wisp of grey. Large calloused hands took his and shook it firmly.

“So your the carpenter my friend has for me. Your not from these parts are you? Don’t worry about that. We have many people who have come from far away so you will hear many accents and languages and customs that are unfamiliar. You’ll get used to it. We work from 6 am to 6pm with a short morning break then an hour at lunch and a late

afternoon break so it can be quite taxing if your not used to it. Many come here looking for jobs and there are many who claim to have a skill that's not evident in their work, so we have to be quite ruthless with those who only come to eat from our table, who spend their nights with much wine and are no use in the morning. There can be no favours here, we have a schedule and are fined for missing targets, so reliability is very important for us. There are always more applicants than jobs so the deadwood is quickly weeded out. Keep that in mind."

"Now as a favour to my old friend I have kept a job open for you. He says your a master carpenter. Is that true?"

"I don't know," said the boy, "I was taught by his brother in law since I was twelve and really know no other trade. People seem pleased with my work, but a master carpenter is not for me to say. But I can promise this. If you give me the job, I will do my best to make you feel it was a good decision."

"Refreshing change to have someone not blowing their own trumpet. Lets see what you know. I want to make a small arch for that window over there. Don't worry about measuring it, what I want you to do is to go to the woodpile over there and select the pieces of wood that you would choose to make it."

"OK," said the boy? "Is the arch pointed or rounded?"

"A pointed arch will go there. When you have finished bring the pieces to me. We will go to the tea shop over there. Bring it to us when you are ready."

The boy went over to the woodpile. Nearby was a team sawing stuff into boards and beams. There was a range of sizes and thicknesses and he was easily able to find a piece for the base and uprights but the grain was too straight for the curves. It was beautiful timber, better stock than he usually had access to, except for the best and most expensive pieces of furniture. And the pieces where he felt the grain was suitable for the curve carried such a lot of waste. Then he saw it the discard pile. Moving over to it he was amazed at the wastage. Sorting through it he found exactly the piece he was looking for. A bit bent and twisted but he could see that the grain curved in exactly the right way.

Taking it and a straight bit of lumber he went to look for the two men. Found them sitting talking. They spotted him and called him over. "Show me what you have chosen," said the foreman, the boy held up the two pieces of lumber.

"I can understand the board," said the foreman, "but what is the discard you're carrying. Were there no other choices?"

“Yes,” said the boy, “but the pieces that had the right grain twist for the curves were large pieces with a lot of wastage and as the window you showed me was only small, I looked in the discards and found this which is ideal. If I shape it this way the grain will run along the curve and it will not split or break or warp. I can splice it into the straight lumber and it will do handsomely.”

The foreman watched the boy trace out how he would fashion the wood.

“Well I’ll be, you can certainly read the grain and its not often we get people with an eye for wastage and cost. That’s good enough for me. Your work will prove your skills, but I have seen enough to give you a start. Be here early and I’ll introduce you around and get you started. Tomorrow at 5.30am here. I will find you. If you like you can leave your tools here, they will be safe and it’ll save you having to carry them home and back. It’ll also mean that your hands are free in the morning to bring any more kit you may have. Well old friend, I must be back to work, there will be many who need guidance. I’ve been gone too long and they will start to tarry if I’m not there to harangue them.”

“Thank you sir,” said the boy, “I will do my best not to disappoint you.”

“I expect no less,” replied the man. “Now go, there is work afoot.”

Chapter 30: Things are looking up

The uncle and the boy set off for home. The boy can’t believe his luck. A job on his first day without even taking a tool from his bag. What a lucky break that he had been taught in a shop where every piece counted and wastage couldn’t be accommodated.

The uncle asked him what had happened, he had expected the boy to have to show that he was competent with a tool in his hand. “What was this about reading the grain, surely there was nothing written on it.”

“No,” laughed the boy. “The biggest skill when working with timber is knowing how it will move and twist. You need a piece that is amenable to the shape you want. The wrong piece may look fine when new but in the heat, rain and sunshine the grain will open and twist, but with the right grain it will tighten and make the piece even stronger over time.”

“I didn’t know that,” said the uncle. “Must be why I’m a priest. Come, let us go home and buy a small skin of wine this calls for a celebration.”

Arriving home about 2 pm they found the girl in the yard hanging out washing.

“Hey how did it go,” called the girl, “although I already know you got the job because I have faith.”

“Your right,” laughed the boy, “All I had to do was select some pieces of timber to make a small arch and when I choose them he was happy that I had chosen a discard that was perfect for the curve. Didn’t even have to pick up a tool. Thank you uncle for your good word.”

“I didn’t give a good word,” said the uncle, “our conversation was about this not being a favour, you had to get it on your own merit. I must admit when we saw the timber you were bringing I thought why did you have that bent piece, surely there were better to choose from, and he said as much. Then when you showed him why you had bought that piece and how you were going to work it he was very impressed. You did this on your own boy. I’ve bought some wine to celebrate.”

“Well come inside,” beckoned the girl, “I have hot food ready for you and have made bread which is fresh. Auntie has taken the baby and gone to market. she’ll be back later.”

They washed for lunch went inside to find the table ready with bowls spoons and cups, fresh bread and a stew pot steaming with a delicious smell. The smell made the boys mouth water and he realised that he was very hungry.

She served them both. “Eat now and take some rest I will hear all the news at supper tonight when you share it with auntie.”

They went back to eating while the girl went back to hanging out the laundry. When she returned she had in her hand the boys work clothes. “Gee you can get things dirty,” said the girl, “took a bit of scrubbing but now they’re clean, so you can make a good impression tomorrow. I’ve just a small patch to put to it and a seam to stitch and it’ll be ready for you in the morning”. Turning to the boy she said, “I’m so proud of you.”

Blushing under the praise the boy made his excuses and went to go lay down. He was still a little tired from the journey and he wanted to be alert for the next day. Laying down he tried to think about the job but all that came to his mind was the touch of her hand in the morning and the pleasure he felt at her praise. Presently he fell asleep. When he awoke it was getting dark.

Rising hurriedly he made his way into the kitchen, opening the door he was greeted by shouts of “surprise”. On the table was a small feast, fruits, cakes, a broth with steamed meat, wine and bread.

“Com’on sleepy head,” laughed the girl. “Your the guest of honour tonight. Take a seat at the table and I will serve you while auntie serves uncle.”

“Where is the child?” asked the boy.

“I’ve put him down for a nap,” said the auntie. “He will wake presently for his evening feed, but for now let us pray and give thanks and you can tell us all about it between mouthfuls.”

The uncle uttered a prayer while they all joined hands. The boy didn’t notice the prayer, he was too conscious of the warmth of the girls hand and how it felt in his and he thought of all of his dreams of yesterday and how they were gone. It made him feel sad, the dashed dreams he had entertained. He pushed the thoughts away and listened while the uncle told the aunt all of the events of the day.

“It’s a happy day,” said the auntie, “what did you think of the project?”

“Well its so big,” said the boy, “I’m sure I’ll get lost. There are people from all about, and there is a workers village nearby. Some men have even bought families.”

“They’re not all families,” cautioned the uncle, “a lot of the women are widows who follow the camps doing such chores that the men need, laundry, cooking, other services. Its rough on them but at least they are fed and have somewhere to sleep. The camps can be a rough mob and fights are common and carousing regular. Its not as easy to live in the camps as you might think. Don’t be too eager to leave. Even with the extra walk you may find it easier to be here”.

“We’ll see how it goes,” said the boy, “I don’t want to burden you and I have to start to make my way.”

The uncle went to press some more wine on the boy but he declined. “I have to be up very early in the morning and I must pack the rest of my tools. If you don’t mind I will go back to bed.”

“What time do you have to leave?” asked the girl.

“About 4.30,” answered the boy. “With this load I will need to allow an hour to get there.”

“Ok,” said the girl, “I haven’t quite finished the mending, but when you come in for breakfast I will leave them in a pile here for you.”

“Thanks,” said the boy.

Going into the outer room where he was sleeping he busies himself with packing up his tools into an easy to carry bundle. Looking up at the stars he prayed in his heart. “Thank you God, you have opened doors for me. May I be worthy of you.”

He lay down to sleep. His last thought before sleep was of how her hand had felt in his while praying.

Chapter 31: First day

The next morning he woke early, first cock crow. Rising quickly he did his ablutions and going into the kitchen to collect his clothes he found the girl with the fire lit, the lamp glowing, the table set for one and the smell of cooking.

“Ah your here,” said the girl, “I was just about to come and wake you. Sit at the table, hot breakfast is ready. Shall I pour your tea?”

“You don’t have to do this,” said the boy. “Some bread and fruit is all I need”.

“Nonsense,” retorted the girl, “a man needs a proper breakfast if he is to work well. Let me at least do that for you”.

When he had finished breakfast she handed him a lunch packet. “This is for lunch and there are some sweet cakes for the other breaks. Have a good day”.

The boy left just as light was beginning to break. His clothes felt marvellous and the patch she had put was almost invisible. The dawn chorus was in full swing and he felt his heart lift up to God. First day of the rest of my life, he couldn’t quite understand why that thought made him a little uncomfortable. Don’t be silly, he said to himself remembering the frightened boy he once was. I no longer have to be afraid, I’m big and strong and have a good trade. Once his stake was made he could go and see the world, maybe even find a nice place to settle down start his own business, build a house then he could think of finding a wife and starting a family. But for now those dreams of the future would have to wait. First things first.

Arriving at the worksite he went to wait as instructed and before too long the foreman arrived.

“Well your punctual at least,” he said. “The camps had a party last night so we may be short of workers in the early part of the day. I have decided to put you with a team of board cutters. It’s not the best team and we don’t give them the best grade. It will be your job to assess the stuff, decide how best it can be prepared for the greatest yield and to oversee the preparations. You will have to account for the logs and the output. You can read and write can’t you?”

“Yes,” said the boy, “I can do numbers as well.”

“Great,” said the foreman, “here is a slate and chalk, keep good records. Over here is where your team will be. Let me show you around.”

Taking him to some logs he said. “Look over and mark each piece, try not to waste too much. You will have 8 men to whom you are responsible. Their wages are determined on output and wastage so your job will really affect their earnings. You’re so young that they may wish to resent you so you will have to win them over if your going to forge a good team. You’re not the boss! but the cutting will be under your direction. Do your best and I’ll check on you at the end of the day. Let me introduce you, here they are.”

“Hi men, this is the new cutting director for your team. He’ll mark the timbers for you to cut. If he turns out to be as good as I think he’ll be, you will all make more money. Make his life easy. Now get to work. These are marked out from yesterday so you can start immediately. By the time you’ve finished that he will have more marked out.”

Having introduced themselves they set about work, 2 men to a saw, 3 saws and another two with adzes stripping the bark of the unmarked logs.

The boy watched them for a moment as they set about work. He then went to the log pile and selecting his first log began to study the grain and the shakes. It was generally good timber and he marked up the first few quickly enough. Between logs he watched them work. First thing he noticed was that the teams were unevenly matched. He thought to himself, I think they would do better if we matched manpower to each side of the saw.

Morning break came and they sat down to smoke, drink water and eat from their supper bags. They talked and joked among themselves and he watched how they interacted. After break he went back to his task and they commenced to start cutting the timbers he had marked. He watched the guys with the adzes, their swing was uncoordinated, and took a lot of power from their blade, often striking too hard or too soft. They were obviously experienced but he felt he could certainly improve their output with a little instruction. He would wait until they included him in their conversations before making suggestions. He didn’t want to offend them.

Lunchtime came and he had marked nearly all the prepared logs. Those doing the sawing had plenty to get on with so needed no guidance. Looking over he saw that one of the bark shredders was tiring visibly. Putting down his slate, he went over to him and said. “It’s a hot day and you have been toiling under the sun. Take a small break and get a drink and sit in the shade for a few moments to regain your strength. You will do better when you are feeling a little fresher. Give me your adze and I will cover for you.”

Gratefully the man handed over the adze and moved over to the shade of the tree. The boy took up the adze and taking position over the log started to strip the bark. Years of preparing the stuff had given him a style of his own and he was able to strip fairly quickly. He didn’t just work from one spot but moved around the log to find the best faces to work, not a traditional pattern, but it was obviously a faster system and he quickly outpaced the other barker. Shortly after the first barker returned. Handing him back the adze he said to the barker. “If you like, I can show you another way of doing this which is quicker and easier and you will find less tiring, but the biggest difference will be how you sharpen the adze. It’s near end of day so when we finish take your adze home and sharpen it. It will make your job so much easier. Its better to work smart than to work hard.”

He had hardly finished talking when the foreman came over. “Lets see your tally sheets,” he said. The boy handed him the slate. “Hmmm,” said the foreman, “it’s better than yesterday”. Going over to the sawn lumber he inspected it. Nodding his head he went to the discard pile to find that it was smaller than yesterday. More lumber, less stuff and less discards. This boy really did know his onions. Returning to the boy he said, “Not a bad first day. Have the lads been good to you?”

“No trouble at all,” said the boy. “Are they purposely arranged in the teams they are? Can I suggest balancing out the manpower on the saws? I think they would find it easier if they were more evenly matched. As it is, one is sometimes dragging the other. After all, sawing wood isn’t really about strength its about consistency.”

“Glad you noticed,” said the foreman. “You may offer them any advice you think fit. They might not thank you, you being of such a young age and many of them have been going from job to job for years and think they know it all. Don’t alienate them or they will make your life difficult. We get the best results from teams that work happily together.”

“Thank you,” said the boy, “I’ll keep that in mind”.

Setting off home he felt it had been a good day. Sure they had been a little standoffish, to be expected on a first day, but he felt he had worked well and there seemed to be a lot of room for improvement. If he was able to show them that his ways were faster and easier

would they respond? After all, We are paid on lumber less wastage. Would the prospect of more money be enough to sway them?

Chapter 32: End of day

Arriving at the compound he opened the gate to find the girl playing with the now crawling child. They didn't see him and he watched quietly as they played together. She seemed a natural with the child who looked very happy.

Hearing the creak of the gate she turned to see him. "Your back," she said happily. "Aunt and uncle have gone to prayers and I'm looking after John. They will be back a little late but I have supper waiting for you. Please wash up and I'll set the table".

Scooping up the baby to her hip the heavily pregnant girl went inside cooing softly to the child.

The boy came into the kitchen. It was cool after the heat of the day and as he sat down she handed him a drink, "its lime juice, it will refresh you, there's fresh bread, dhall, some aubergine, and 2 eggs. I have already eaten with aunt and uncle but if you like I can nurse the baby at the table and you can tell me all about the day. How was it?"

"Amazing," said the boy, "when I got there the foreman put me to work with a team turning logs into boards."

"That sounds like hard graft," opined the girl, "sawing big logs all day".

"It is," answered the boy, "but that wasn't my job. It seems that my skills at reading a log are the big demand. Its all about getting the most timber and the least wastage. Something your father was very big on. After his accident it became important to reduce wastage to a minimum and he taught me to look at the grain and shakes and to get the most out of a piece of wood. The foreman came at the end of the day to collect my tally sheet and he seemed happy enough. I mentioned a couple of ideas I had to speed things up and he seemed pleased. Told me to assist them in any way I could but to be careful not to appear like an upstart. Seems they can be a bit touchy."

"Did you have any trouble?" asked the girl.

"No," replied the boy, "I did do a little work though, one of the barkers was flagging and as I was ahead I told him to take a break, drink some water and I would cover for him".

“How did that go?” the girl asked?

“Well the adze was a bit blunt and when I was small and would be helping your dad I found an easier pattern for stripping bark as I wasn’t so strong then. I’ve refined it over the years and now find it the quickest. I’ve asked him to sharpen his adze tonight and I’ll see if he is happy to show me in the morning. Think he was glad of the break. We’ll see tomorrow”.

“Let me pour you a wine, sit outside and have a smoke, I’ll feed and change the baby and put him to bed. I’ve made up your room with fresh bedding and your clothes are ready.”

Sitting outside under the stars he took a sip of wine and lit a smoke and gazing up at the stars he felt a real peace.

“Lord thank you for all you have done. When I was beaten you arranged succor, a family, a career and a promise. Well that promise is gone but the hope remains. Their faith has been good to me. Can’t say the same about their church, so maybe there is another way of understanding it. I give you thanks for the kindnesses they have shown me. I know I am supposed to feel aggrieved. And that the future I dreamed of is gone and a new future must beckon, so I am going to put my trust in your hands. Please be kind to the girl and her coming child. I don’t believe the stories they tell, even though she agrees they are true. There is something more going on here. Innocence such as hers is easy to take advantage of. I have only seen her good. I remember being abused, a different abuse but still abuse. My body was abused and for her it was her innocence and her trust. My body has healed, I mean there are scars, but I’m stronger for them. She’s different from the girl in the inn or the camp followers. She has found a way to reconcile, rejoice and her trust in god is unimpaired even though she has been under constant threat, vilified, ridiculed and deceived. She greets the days joyfully, tackles her tasks with pride and is so helpful.”

Make some man a wonderful wife, he thought wryly.

“Well anyway father, the future beckons and I have a task tomorrow.”

Lying back he re-ran the work in his mind.

Chapter 33: The picnic

Next morning he awoke with the first cock crow. The temperature was pleasant, he felt refreshed, he had ideas for the day. Getting out of bed he pulled on his work-clothes from the previous day.

Crossing the yard to the kitchen he could see the glow of a flame. Opening the door he found the girl fanning the fire into flame. “Ohh your early,” she exclaimed, “I didn’t think you would need to leave for nearly an hour.”

“I fancied in getting in early, I’ve a couple of ideas I’d like to do. Need to make a good impression”.

“I haven’t yet made your lunch.”

“Never mind,” he said, “Ill just grab some cheese and olives. Are there any figs?”

“No,” said the girl, “there’s some bread”.

“That’ll do,” he said.

“Well at least have a cup of tea before you go,” she said, “waters on the boil. While your drinking that I can make some eggs and toast. It’ll be ready before you finish your tea. What are your plans?”

The boy tells her about his ideas briefly. Finishing his eggs he rises from the table. “I’ll take my set stone in today. It will help with tool sharpening. Make life easier all round. Thanks for breakfast.”

He sets off to work and the girl busies herself preparing food for the others, cleaning in the kitchen and other chores.

While the oats are cooking she goes out to feed the chickens and milk the goat. Returning inside she finds auntie, uncle and baby John sitting in the kitchen, drinking tea and nursing.

“Well you’ve been up early,” they said, “has the boy gone so early”? “Yes,” she replies, “I got up to make him breakfast and was going to make him a lunch packet but he decided to go early so I didn’t have time to get him more than some eggs and toast. For lunch he’s taken only enough for a snack. I wish I had known earlier I could have been prepared.”

“You worry about him,” questioned the aunt?

“He’s been so good to me,” said the girl, “even though I have caused him so much hurt and disappointment. He’s come to my aid and protection, and has shown care for me without judgement. There were many who used me, debased me, who would do anything to protect their own position, and yet he used his position to protect me. That’s a big difference”.

“Why don’t you make him a lunch packet,” suggested the aunt, “uncle can take you to the site and you can see for yourself where he is working. Its a big project. In fact the walk will do me good and John can get the fresh air, why don’t we all go. We can take picnic and have lunch with him”.

“What a good idea,” agreed the uncle. “If we go with plenty of time we can have a look around. Its fascinating and very cosmopolitan. So many people from so many places. If we leave about ten we will have time to look around before lunch. It may take us some time to find him as well. I’ll go do my chores.”

They set out and walk at a leisurely pace, the babe strapped to the aunt’s back and the uncle carrying the picnic. The day is warming but a gentle breeze is coming off the lake and is refreshingly cool. After about an hour they arrive at the site. “It’s so big,” exclaims the girl.

The uncle starts to point out the various parts of the site, the brick making, woodworking, stone-carving and other areas. He points out the workers settlements and tells them all he knows about the site.

Presently they spot the boy working with his team. “Wait here,” says the uncle, “I will go and tell him we are here and ask when he will break for the lunch and where to meet up with us.”

Leaving the women under the shade of a tree, he goes over to the team. The boy sees him and comes over.

“Is something wrong uncle?” he asks.

“No boy, The girl was upset that you went off to work without lunch. She had gotten up early just to make sure that everything was ready for you but you had decided to go in early and she hadn’t had time to prepare a lunch for you. So to humour her we have decided to bring you a picnic lunch. After all, the girls are curious about this place and your new job and wanted to see so it seemed like a good idea. Two birds with one stone. You get lunch and they get to see. When will you break for lunch?”

“I think the guys on the saws will want to break when they finish the logs they’re on, so about 45 mins.”

“Great,” said the uncle. “See that tall tree over there, pointing to it. We will be there.”

A short while later the boy joins the group. “Well this is a pleasant surprise,” he says, “I was prepared to be a little hungry”.

“Why did you want to come in early?” asked the uncle.

“Well,” replied the boy, “when I was working yesterday I saw that there were a couple of improvements that I could make that would make life easier and hence we would process more stuff and make more money. So I came in early to put an edge on the adze the other barker was using. I find that if I change the angle a couple of degrees it makes lighter work”.

“How did it go?” inquired the uncle.

“Very well, the other barker sharpened his adze last night to their normal face and they were able to compare how the difference was. They seemed pretty pleased, we’ve gained half a log this morning over yesterday. This afternoon I’m going to suggest to the sawyers that there is a different set I can put to their saws which is faster on rough sawn. It’s a trick her dad showed me and it’s good. I’ll do a set for one of the teams and they can compare”.

“Pleased to see that your fitting in well,” said the uncle.

They talked through the lunch and when it was time to go back to work they bade him goodbye.

Back at home the girl helped around the house with the chores.

Chapter 34: Settling in

That night when the boy got home he found his bed made, his clothes cleaned and a dinner waiting for him. The uncle had gone off to the temple to prepare for his next attendance, and the aunt was resting.

“You don’t have to do all this for me,” he said to the girl, “you should be taking some rest too”.

“I’m good,” the girl replied, “the walking really helps and it was fascinating to see the works. How are the men you work with, do you get on well?”

“Actually, they have been most welcoming. I was a little worried that they would think I am an upstart, they having been doing this job for so long and me suggesting that there are some changes that we could make but they were very pleased that my ideas were making it a little easier and faster and asked if I had some other suggestions. I told them about the set for the saws and suggested that they rearrange their saw partner to get a better balance. At first they said that they had been working in pairs for a long time, but they agreed to try my ideas and see how they worked out. After all everybody wants to make more money. When the day was over we had improved on yesterday and worked a little less hard. The foreman was pleased as well. Tonight I’m going to apply the set to the saw I’ve bought home and we’ll see how much they like it”.

“How does it work?” asked the girl.

The boy explained how the set cut rough sawn faster but wasn’t as good for finish work. If all went well, he was confident that they would improve by at least a log a day. That, added to the less wastage meant they could earn as much as 10% more a week.

Having finished his meal he goes out to set the saw teeth. The girl starts cleaning up. Some time later she came to him bringing a cup of tea. “Your working so hard,” she said. “Take a break”.

“Thanks,” said the boy, “I’m just so keen to make a good impression.”

“Well,” inquired the girl, “are you going to go in so early tomorrow?”

“No need,” said the boy, “I could use the extra hours sleep. The saw is done and we’ll see how the guys like it.”

“Ok,” said the girl, “I’ve made you a lunch packet for lunch tomorrow and I’ll have breakfast ready for you in the morning”.

“No need for that,” said the boy. “Just leave something out and I’ll help myself. You should be resting more.”

“Actually,” said the girl, “I’m pleased to be up early, this baby doesn’t like to let me rest in the mornings. So I’m glad to get up with something to do. After all, its mostly what I’ve been doing for the last few years in the temple. So it seems natural for me. And you’ve been so good that I like to do it for you. I’ve enjoyed our chats. Having been in cloister for so long it nice to talk to you. you’ve never judged me, I know you have been hurt by my actions and I’m sorry about that”.

“Well,” said the boy, “I’ve also suffered by the actions of others and if it hadn’t been for your parents I don’t know what would have happened to me. As it is, I now have a future as a tradesman. So all’s good. It will be hard for you once the baby is born and you have to go back to your parents. People will forget over time and the baby will be a great joy to your parents.

At this the girl went quiet. “I was so sure that I had been selected by God. I allowed my wishes to deceive me. But I’m sure that this child will come and bring its love with it. Strange how the future can change so suddenly. Still I trust in God and know he will make everything right. Sometimes I think what if, and then I see that there are many paths to take. So trust seems to be the only sensible path. I better go to bed now, you should get some rest too. It can’t be easy working through the heat of the day. Goodnight.”

Chapter 35: Wisdom from the camps

The next morning the boy came into the kitchen to find hot porridge with raisins in it, some toast and a boiled egg and tea ready. He and the girl chatted amiably through the meal and then he set off for work.

The day went well, his suggestions were listened to, and the crew were happy with the changes he had suggested and that night they had improved their tally. So this went on for several days. The men now asked the boy for suggestions and during the day a friendly mateship grew between the team. Steadily the tally improved.

Over the next weeks they started to talk about life on the site. One of the men was married with two children and they lived in the camp. They talked about the camp and the camp followers. It seemed that a couple of the men had developed friendly relations with some of the female camp followers. The camp worked like a small town. It had bakeries, bathhouses, brothels and more. There was even a rudimentary school for the children.

One morning the girl said, “I haven’t made you lunch. I’m hoping you will let me bring it to you. I could use the walk and the chance to get out.”

“Are you sure?” questioned the boy, “it’s a long walk in the hot sun.”

“I will take my time,” responded the girl, “after all its easier than carrying water and I’ve been inside so long its nice to get out and about”.

“Ok,” agreed the boy, “will you remember how to find me.”

“Yes,” replied the girl, “the tree we had lunch under is easy to spot and its shady and cool and I can see all around what’s happening so I wont be bored waiting. Are your sure it’ll be ok.”

“Yes,” enthused the boy, “I’ll look forward to it.”

After lunch the guys asked about the girl, “Whose the pretty girl bringing you lunch, is it your girlfriend?” Smirks and nudges. “You going to be a daddddy.”

“No,” said the boy, “she is the daughter of the man who taught me carpentry. We are living at her in-laws.”

“Well she is certainly nice to you,” said one of the team who was married. “I’m married to a woman whose husband died leaving her with two young children and she ended up in the camp. It’s a hard life for a woman in the camp, not everyone is respectful and they are sometimes compromised by the need to provide, and a lot of the blokes can be rough and abusive and treat them shamelessly. When I met my wife she had been beaten up by one of the men because she didn’t want to accommodate him. But I got to know her and she asked for so little and tried to do so much. It’s hard to live in camp alone, fine for the roughnecks but so much easier if you are two. And so much cheaper and it makes it so much easier not to spend all your money on drink and stuff. I wouldn’t still be here without her help, and its nice to have a semblance of home. Not as lonely, and there’s other attractions. Course she’s not as pretty as your girl but I’m glad that I took the risk with her, and the kids are fine, quite growing on me. The nice thing about the camps is your past doesn’t matter. Everybody takes things at face value. She does seem sweet on you. I have to go to the camp for lunch, I don’t get a picnic under a tree.”

The others laughed, made jokes and gently ribbed him about it, but it was all good natured. The men shared stories about how they came to be on site. A couple had done it all their lives and one of them had grown up in the camps. Its not the easiest life travelling form job to job. Gradually they shared stories. The girl came most days now, the boy looked forward to lunch and he loved how she listened to him as he told her of his days and plans.

One day the guy who had married the camp follower said. “I know this sounds strange but you should marry that girl. She’s very good to you and in this life it’s much better. Most of us are here because we made mistakes or something happened to us but to have a willing partner is a big bonus. Its not what went before that makes the difference but how you deal with the now. Life isn’t always perfect but it is easier with help.”

That night after supper the boy was sitting out under the stars, drinking wine and smoking. Work was going well, the previous day the foreman had said that the team had improved so much that they had risen in the ranks, he was going to move their team up to a better position, it would mean better logs to cut and a slightly better rate to go with the new position. He and the guys were very happy, better wages better logs a real team spirit. And the craic was good which made the days easier. He thought about life in the camps. It wasn’t the same as he had envisioned a future but it wasn’t all bad. He thought about the girl back in her fathers compound and he was a little sad for her. She was getting close now, only about another month and the baby would come and she would have to go back to her parents. Little John was now nearly walking, well crawling very fast and he could see how much pleasure the aunt and uncle got from him.

Chapter 36: Conversation with uncle

That night he had a dream, in the dream he was with the girl and her babe and it felt good and when he awoke he felt sad. He had the day off, it was the Sabbath. That day he couldn’t help but feel a little anxious for the future, but he tried to keep a cheerful face as he escorted the two women to the temple. Letting them go to the women’s section he took his place among the men.

Uncle was leading and as it was his last day of his tour of duty and he would be accompanying them home for the ritual meal. When the service was over the boy asked the women if they would be OK to go home without him. He would accompany the uncle home when he had signed off. They agreed and said they would have everything ready.

When the uncle came out he was surprised to see the boy. “Didn’t you go with the ladies?” he asked?

“Actually,” said the boy, “I stayed behind because I was hoping to talk to you. I would value your council.”

“Sure,” said the uncle, “we can talk on the way home and as I’m a bit early we could stop for a cheeky libation. I know a nice spot where we won’t be disturbed. So what’s on your mind?”

“Tell me,” asked the boy, “are you happy?”

“What do you mean?” said the uncle.

“Well,” ventured the boy, “I know your story. After all I was here. How do you deal with what happened?”

“Shit that’s deep,” responded the uncle. “If you had asked me a year ago my answer would have been very different. Then I felt cheated and it was very hard for a period. I even cursed God for what happened. I mean, I know what happened and how my wife chose to deal with it and I still felt a bit betrayed. Without the grace that God gave me in the sanctuary I might not have found a way to deal with it. It was hard to understand my wife’s pain, but I’ve had a lot of time to reflect over it, and I see now that she was motivated by a love and duty for me. She couldn’t help what happened at the beginning and although she wanted to be a mother, without John she might never have been able to be wife to me as she has now become. Funnily enough, as I have tried to understand her position I’ve grown to love her even more and we are much closer and I know that when we go to bed tonight we will reach for each other with joy. John has bought so much into our lives. My wife has gone from being a possession to a partner. Its a lot better though I wouldn’t have believed it. Why do you ask?”

“I had a dream last night,” said the boy, “in it the girl was with me and there was a child as well and it felt good. When I awoke the memory of the dream made me a little sad.”

“Do you like the girl?” asked the uncle.

“Well she’s kind, very helpful, listens to me when I talk of future plans, doesn’t complain, and she can be very funny, she’s well educated. I remember when we first came here after the trek and one night I was lying in bed I thought she would make a good wife for somebody without our history. We were betrothed when she was only 10, then she had no say and everything was mapped out. That’s why she was sent to the convent. To learn all the skills for our life. Seems she learnt a bit much and that future was dashed. I had resigned myself to fate. Now because of events we have spent a lot of time together and I’ve become very fond of her but the child is not mine and she didn’t have circumstances forced upon her. I mean she doesn’t even know who could be the father of the child. She was happy to be every-bodies plaything.”

“Yeah I know. Listen! I want to share some things with you. It’s not as uncommon as you think. Things happen to boys as well as girls. Generally we keep it pretty hush hush and the authorities usually try to make the problem go away quietly. We lie to pretend it doesn’t happen but it does. People are weak and often led astray especially when they are young. She’s paid a big price for what happened and you also have had to pay a price.”

“But what has happened to me gives me another perspective. I know couples who seem to do everything right and on the face of it all seems perfect, and yet their still not really together. In fact my wife and I both fitted that description once. I mean it was OK, nothing to complain about, she tried to be a good and obedient wife and did all her wifely duties but somehow this fire we have had to go through has made us stronger. Now I think about her, I didn’t so much before. Before she was like the clothes I wore, now she’s like my arm. I have learnt this. John will never know any father but me and I think of him as my natural son, and I mean he could be but that is bye the bye. We are a family in every sense of the word. I never thought about my wife’s loneliness before, now I can see how hard it was for her. Hiding herself away in her barren shame. I was only sorry for myself having a barren wife. Well maybe that was my fault, I don’t think about it any more, I’m glad for what we have. Maybe this is how God works. The past has to be forgiven if life is to be embraced. What’s really on your mind?”

“One of the guys I work with is married to one of the camp followers, a widow with 2 children. He knows how she survived before they met and the hardships she had to endure. They met after she had been beaten up by a guy whose advances she tried to refuse. But they got together anyway and he says its the best decision he ever made. They rib me about the girl in a good natured way, not like the malice that we had in her home village. We’ve both had it tough. If it wasn’t for her parents, who knows what would have happened to me.”

“I can’t tell you what to do,” advised the uncle, “this must be a decision you make. If you cannot leave the past behind don’t carry it forward into the future. A woman will do anything for her child. It’s the strongest bond of all. Never come between that. If you have a mind to consider the girl, its obvious that she thinks highly of you. She shows a maturity beyond her years. She’s great with John and you can feel a deep bond with the child she is carrying and she will be a great mother. But don’t compound the problem, if you don’t feel that you can let the past be the past don’t push that forward, better her fathers home than regrets.”

“Thank you,” said the boy, “you’ve been a great help. Her father taught me that it is possible to love another man’s child and I hardly remember my own parents now.”

“Well if your going to do something about it,” said the uncle, “you had better get a move on. We’ve had word that there is to be a census and we must go to the place of our fathers to be counted. She will have to go back very soon unless she goes with you and it will all be different then. Com’on lets go home the girls will be wondering what has happened to us.”

Arriving home they found everything ready, candles lit, meal laid out.

“Boy,” said the uncle, “why don’t you lead the prayers tonight.”

As he recited the homily he sensed a real peace overtake him. Finishing the meal he helped the girl do the dishes and clean up while the uncle and aunt took the baby outside to play. They could hear them chatting and playing outside and it seemed idyllic.

Chapter 37: The proposal

“I was wanting to talk to you,” ventured the boy shyly. “I have been thinking a lot over the past months. I know this may seem sudden, but do you think you could grow to love me? I’ve certainly became very fond of you. Life is hard to be alone in. Would you marry me?”

The girl drops the plate she is drying.

“Ohh,” she said, “I’ve not dared to think about it. I know the shame I bought you, and there has never been anyone who treated me as tenderly as you, and I know what a real man you can be, unlike the others, but you can’t marry me, I mean I’m not alone, I come as a pair, not yet, but very soon. Can you love us without reserve? Would you be able to hold your head up in our town. It might be too much to ask?

“Girl,” he said, “we wouldn’t be going back to your town, I have heard that they are looking for tradesmen in Egypt, It doesn’t start for a few months, but I’m certain to get a start. First I have to go to Bethlehem. Your uncle has arranged for me to be counted among those descendants of David for a census that has to be obeyed. If you came to me as wife you wouldn’t have to go home. You could leave it all behind. We could start a new life fresh with a clean slate. Nobody would know.”

“And what of my parents?” said the girl. “Would they never get to meet the grandchild? They can’t travel and they are stuck there. I would be happy to be your wife, to go where you go and to share life with you, but not in disgrace, not without my head held high.”

“I was undone in the temple and left with child. My aunt has convinced me that the child is the redemption. If I go with you as wife when the child is born will you take me and the baby to my parents house so that my child can be admitted into the temple for consecration? The temple may have done me wrong, but the faith has not. They need to see that love has redeemed me, that we have risen above. They need to bless the child they tried to curse. My parents need to hold my child. And not everybody at the temple is bad. If it hadn’t been for the old man coming and telling me what was being planned, the authorities would have locked me away and disposed of the child and so hidden their sin. And the old woman, she helped me away and put me on the path to my uncles. God is

sometimes found in the humblest of places and among the simplest of people. Could you do that for me?"

"You ask a lot. I want to hurt them for what they have done. I know that you trust that God is the father of your child even though logic says otherwise. When I was talking to your uncle today about it he said, maybe that's how God works. He said a funny thing which made a lot of sense. He said that a child does not know who sired it. It only knows the father that is introduced to it. Well I believe you, and I have learnt to have faith and trust in you. If that's what you need I will do it and you need have no fear. God will protect us."

The girl threw her arms awkwardly around the boy. "You have been so wonderful to me. I can face anything if you are by my side. My hero!"

The boy blushed and the girl started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"Remember when my parents arranged our proposal and you asked me what I wanted in the future? I said I wanted what my mama had, but I wanted more, I wanted an education, I wanted adventure and to travel, well I got an education and what an education it has proved to be. And now you offer me travel and adventure. Then when it came time for you to go away to fulfil the requirements, mum was crying and saying she loved you as a son, she made you promise to come back. And I made you pick me up and asked if you really were my prince charming. You kissed my forehead and told me that you would show me the world and that we would laugh and play and run and that I will be mummy and you would be daddy. So I guess you really are my prince charming. I will always strive to be your princess. I don't need to learn to love you. You were made for me to love you."

Raising her eyes and arms towards heaven the girl exclaims:

"My soul doth magnify the Lord : and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded : the lowliness of his handmaiden. For behold, from henceforth : all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath magnified me : and holy is his Name. And his mercy is on them that fear him : throughout all generations. He hath shewed strength with his arm : he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat : and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things : and the rich he hath sent empty away. He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel : as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever."

Chapter 38: New life beckons

“What’s going on here?” said the uncle seeing them both together.

“Uncle,” says the girl, “this boy has asked me to be his wife and I would like that very much. Will you marry us?”

“Don’t think so,” the uncle replied with a smile, “I don’t fancy him at all and I’m already happily married. But if you like I will solemnise your marriage and be happy to do it.

The aunt burst into tears. “I’m so happy for both of you,” she said kissing them both. “You will be good together. When?”

“Needs to be soon,” said the uncle, “there’s a census and I have arranged for the boy to go to another city and be counted among them. It’s a good few days travel and in her condition you will need to go slow. You will need to buy a donkey, she wont be able to walk. I’ll talk to a man I know and get you a good deal.”

“Well mother lets leave these lovebirds to talk, all this loving is making me feel fruity.”

The young couple giggle and the wife hushes him. They retire.

The young couple talk long into the night.

The next morning the boy rises late, the girl is still sleeping and when he comes into the kitchen he finds the aunt and uncle horsing around.

“Well I see you had a good night,” remarked the boy.

The aunt and uncle giggle. “Off with you,” retorts the uncle, “you have a job to quit and I have a marriage and a donkey to arrange and you wife have a party to organise. I’ll have you hitched by tomorrow night.”

The boy arrives at the site to find his team working steadily.

“Hey sleepy head,” they say, “we’ve almost caught up to the logs you have marked.”

The boy grins, “I’m getting married and your all invited.”

“Congratulations,” they chorus with much slapping on the back. The boy then explains that he will be quitting and won’t be returning.

“Gee we will be sad to see you leave,” they say. “You’ve really helped us, we’re now one of the better teams.”

After finding his supervisor the boy explains his plans.

“Bummer,” said the foreman, “I was about to promote you to leading hand. Your team has improved so much since you were with them.”

“Never mind,” said the boy, “they understand what I showed them and can show others. The marking takes a long time to learn but the sets and the angles I showed them will speed all other teams. Thanks for the job.”

“Before you go,” said the foreman, “let me give you a letter of recommendation. This is a small world, building sites, wherever you go you will find men who know me and my work. The letter will guarantee you a start. I wish you well and wish I had a hundred more like you.”

“Perhaps our paths will cross again,” said the boy. “you’ve been very good to me. Thank you again.”

Chapter 39: The baby arrives

The marriage is a small and quiet affair, only about 20 attendees. The team he has worked with and their significant others, The aunt and uncle and a few friends of theirs. It feels deeply significant.

Two days later they leave for the town they must go to. The girl is in her last weeks and they have to travel slowly. The girl riding the donkey and the boy leading. They arrive in the town late on the eve of the census to find that everything is booked out. Eventually they find a place that although booked out has some space in the barn.

“Its all I have,” says the innkeeper. “It may have to do, you don’t look in any condition to go further.”

That night the girl goes into labour. The boy doesn’t know what to do to help. Trying hard to make her as comfortable as possible he is at a loss as to how he to assist her.

Some shepherds who are watching their flocks nearby hear the girls screams and come to investigate. He tells them of their predicament. One of the shepherds says, “I have never delivered a child, but I have delivered lots of sheep and goats. Make a fire and boil some water and get some clean cloths.” Turning his attention to the girl he instructs the panting girl. We’re here to help and you need to help us help. I need you to try and relax between contractions, breath deeply and fast and when I say push I need you to push. Running his hand over her stomach he determines that the baby is in the correct position. It’s going to be OK he says, the baby is lying right so it should be a relativity uncomplicated delivery. This might take a little time as your body needs to adjust.

Over the next few hours the timing of the girls contractions come faster and faster. The boy is now at her side consoling and breathing with the girl. The shepherd determines that she is now fully dilated. “Now,” he says to the girl, “when I say push I want you to push as hard as you can.” With the next contraction he tells the girl to push, the contraction passes and the shepherd says, “I can see the baby crowning, a couple more pushes might be enough.” She contracts again, “push,” commands the shepherd she pushes. The contraction subsides, “breath deeply now,” says the Shepherd, “and on the next contraction push as hard as you can.” With that the girl contracts and pushes and the baby is born.

The shepherd takes the child clears its nose and mouth and smacks it to make it cry. The wail of the child is wonderful to hear. Wrapping the newborn in the cloths he passes the child to the exhausted mother. Its a healthy baby boy he says. The shepherds are jubilant and begin to sing praises to God and to congratulate the couple and to slap the assisting shepherd on the back.

The girl cradles the baby in her arms and turning to a relieved boy she says to the babe. “Say hello to your daddy.”

News of the birth travels fast and others alerted to the birth come to see the child and marvel at the assisting shepherd. Some travelling merchants staying at the inn come and bring gifts of their merchandise. Laying the gifts at the boys feet they say, “A child is the most precious of gifts.”

The boy is amazed at how he feels. He falls to his knees and offers up a prayer of thanks and dedication. There is much merriment.

It takes two days for the boy to register himself his wife and the child for the census.

That done he says to the girl. “As hard as it sounds if we are to get the child to your parents in time for the blessing we need to leave now. Will you be OK to travel?”

“I know you will make it OK,” says the girl. “I’m eager to show this child and husband to my mum and dad. They will want to hold him and I want him to be held by them. This child will be so blessed to know such a man as you as father.”

Chapter 40: The blessing

The journey is uneventful and all goes well, the girl is strong and robust and the child lusty. They arrive back at her parents place quite late but they are expected as the mother has had notification from the aunt. All three are welcomed with great joy and many tears. Grandma takes possession of the child.

“You two go and rest now I will look after this little man. Tomorrow your father will arrange the blessing ceremony. What are your plans from here?”

The boy tells them of the job in Egypt. It makes them sad that they are going away again but they know their town and understand its all for the best.

Two days later the boy and the girl attend the temple for the blessing.

The temple chief is being assisted by some of the young men of the girls downfall. They are shocked when they know who it is but as there is a full congregation they are silent.

The boy approaches the chief priest. “This is my son. I am a member of this congregation and this is my wife. Place Gods blessing upon him and welcome him as a member of good standing for we mean to bring him up in the knowledge of this faith.”

There is nothing the priests can do. They provide the blessing and call on the congregation to welcome him. One of the congregation rises from his seat. It is the old man who warned the girl to flee. Coming to the altar, he takes the child and blesses him and looking at this new family he says in his heart.

“Now I have seen the truth of our faith I can die easily. Blessed be this child forever.”

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace : according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen : thy salvation; Which thou hast prepared : before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles : and to be the glory of thy people Israel.”

The old woman who helped the girl takes the child and showing him to everyone tells how handsome and gracious a child, “Look upon him and be blessed.”

The congregation gathers around with congratulations. Quietly the officiating priests slink out. The mean spirited are silenced.

Chapter 41: All's well that ends well

They stay a month, then it is time to go. Although they are married the boy has refrained from the girl due to her condition. He has stayed in the workshop and she has stayed with the child in the house. On the night of departure the boy has gone to bed early when he is awoken by a soft hand caressing his cheek.

Looking up he sees the girl.

"Hello husband," she whispers softly, "let my first night with you be under my fathers roof."

She then leans down and kisses him deeply. He allows her to lead and they consummate their marriage. It is glorious.

They set off for Egypt.

The end

Just for fun.

They are about to leave when 3 kings pull up on exhausted camels. "Bugger," they say, "the star went out. Frightened we might have missed you. This babe is worth more than all the treasure. But we have bought treasure anyway."

also The end

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